

# Nothing's gonna harm you

**Story:** Nothing's gonna harm you

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**Summary:** He wishes he could try again. He wishes he had another chance, he wishes he could have stopped the Bishop earlier, he wishes he could have protected everyone. Reinhard, of all people, should know to be careful with his wishes, but it doesn't occur to him. \_\_\_\_\_ or; Pride if Reinhard finds himself back in canon rezero. Inspired by "Forgotten Memories Forge Winding Paths" but Rein is like 30% more unhinged and also has Return By Death. THIS IS AN AU.

## **\*Chapter 1\*: Prologue**

Reinhard doesn't die, for some reason.

Even as everything burns, even as the architect of his suffering faces him and wishes death upon him, he doesn't die. He lives through one tragedy after another, and he can't cry, because it's not over yet, they all know it; how could it possibly be over?

He lives through the smoke and the slashes of the Gut Hunter's kukri, and for what? Only to find a dying archbishop and a silver-haired girl crying over him. She isn't crying *for* him, just *over* him, Reinhard can tell. She is confused, and scared, and so deeply saddened by the tragedy that surrounds her.

Reinhard forces himself not to walk away from her. Yes, the Bishop is about to draw his final breath, but it's not over yet; Reinhard will have to deal with the aftermath, starting with the poor girl.

He approaches her, slowly, and she flips around with *shame* written all over her tearful face.

"He s—" she sobs, "He said it w— it was for me, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I—"

Reinhard can't do anything, except set a hand on her shoulder and hope it helps. He doesn't have the words to console her.

He wishes he could try again. He wishes he had another chance, he wishes he could have stopped the Bishop earlier, he wishes he could have protected everyone.

Reinhard, of all people, should know to be careful with his wishes, but it doesn't occur to him.

As sudden as a shiver, he feels his heart stop.

He feels cold. Unbearably cold, stiff like marble, and completely powerless, he slumps on the burnt ground in a cold sweat. Emilia is trying to help him, but there's nothing she can do.

Death is worse than he could have ever known. His joints are stiff, his eyes are glazed over, his bones feel like ice and his muscles feel like marble. He is so cold.

So cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold.

Cold-

"Are you okay?"

Reinhard blinks.

"Hey, you spaced out, there. What's wrong?"

The voice sounds nervous. There's a hand on Reinhard's shoulder.

When his vision clears, he's standing in front of a guard. Reinhard knows him. His name is... Remus; he's tall, dark-haired, eight years Reinhard's senior, and he's been dead for six months.

## **\*Chapter 2\*: Three Years**

Remus makes him sit down. Reinhard is grateful for that, because he's not sure he's awake. But no, he must be. He remembers, distinctly, the unmistakable feeling of his heart stopping, of going cold, of being unable to move. It's a new feeling for Reinhard; he couldn't possibly have imagined it.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Remus asks him for the nth time, "Do you need to rest? You can take the rest of the day off, if you want. It's not a problem."

Reinhard stares at him for a moment. That *is* Remus, surely: he has the same short, black hair as he used to have, the same dark skin, the same deep eyes, the same slightly crooked smile. It's the same person he knew from years ago, but he's alive, and his hair is back to the cut he had two years ago, before the increasingly crushing stress on the nation took its toll on him and he started to forget to shave.

Reinhard missed Remus.

"No, I'd rather patrol with you until the end of my shift." he smiles, politely, "Just one thing."

"Sure."

"What day is it?"

Three years. Reinhard went back nearly three years. How?

His head is spinning as he and Remus go on to complete their patrol. At least he has time, right? He has time, right?

Three years ago... Everyone was alive. Reinhard's breath catches in his throat. Suddenly, there are so many people he desperately wants to see. He can't help a giddy chuckle.

Remus gives him a sidelong glance: "You're pale." he remarks, "Is this because of the fight? It's okay, if it is. I mean, even *you* had a hard time against that maniac; I wouldn't expect you to be at your best."

*Where is he going with this* , Reinhard wonders.

Remus stops to think for a moment.

"You really should rest. Go home, Reinhard." he commands.

Reinhard doesn't want to leave him alone. For him, it was only six months ago that Remus said goodnight to him and went on his patrol, only for his upper body to be found the next day, with his legs lying ten feet away.

What if they say *see you tomorrow*, and *tomorrow* never comes for Remus?

Reinhard doesn't want to see that again: "No, I'm fine." he insists, high-pitched, "Can we— can we please finish patrolling?"

"I can do that on my own. The last stretch is always quiet, anyway." shrugs Remus.

*The last stretch was quiet when they sliced you in half, too.*

"No." Reinhard shakes his head, "No, it isn't. Something could happen."

"Reinhard."

"No."

Remus's tone grows harsher: "Reinhard, I am your commanding officer. You're unwell, so go home. I can take care of myself for an hour."

Seeing Reinhard's face lose colour, his eyes soften: "I know you're worried about the Gut Hunter, but I doubt she can do anything but lick her wounds right now. Go home. You told me just this morning that you wanted to stay with your lady, right? Well, go do that. Go do *anything* else, if it keeps your mind off of it. You look so tense you're going to snap."

"My lady?" Reinhard repeats, dumbly. Who?

Remus looks at him like he's just grown two heads: "Yes. Your lady, Felt. The one you picked off the street yesterday. You're not going to leave your poor maids to deal with her alone all day, are you?"

Right, the maids. The maids that have been dead for two months.

And this *lady Felt* he has no memory of. No, wait. The name rings a bell.

*Felt.*

Reinhard shoots Remus a dubious glance, but he's in enough trouble already. He doesn't want to be reported, not after everything that has, from his perspective, just happened.

Besides, he has so many people to check on.

Reluctantly, he takes the last hour off.

Reinhard isn't the type to get emotional over a building, he really isn't, but seeing his home in one piece is a pleasant feeling regardless. The last time he saw it, it had collapsed, crushing the maids under its weight.

He pushes the doors open a little too quickly.

Rosa shoots him a look: "Master Reinhard, you're early."

She was carrying a tray, already halfway up the stairs when she was distracted by Reinhard's arrival.

He can't help but smile at her, a giddy sort of smile: "Rosa! It's good to see you."

Rosa, as always, isn't very impressed: "It's good to see you too, sir." she says, monotonously.

Rosa is in her late twenties, but she's been working for the Astrea family since childhood. And seeing her standing on the stairs, her strawberry blonde hair gathered in a flower-like bun at the back of her head, her uniform spotless, her ice blue eyes gleaming in the dim light of the foyer, is a complete opposite of the last time he saw her.

"How have you been?" he blurts out, and Rosa tilts her head in confusion.

"Perfectly well, thank you. Just as I was this morning." she answers, slowly.

"Good, good." he mutters.

She gives him a strange look, but she continues on her way up the stairs with a minute shake of her head. Rosa is very prim and proper. Unlike the new maid.

*Crash!*

Reinhard flinches. He almost sprints up the stairs, until he hears three yelling voices coming from wherever Rosa is going.

"That's it! If you don't let me do your hair, you're doing it yourself!"

"I dun remember askin' ya to do it! My hair's just fine! And stop pullin' it!"

"Would you two settle down?"

"She started it!"

"I ain't started nothin'!"

"I don't care who started it, stop it!"

There is a sickeningly sweet scent of perfume wafting from one of the rooms. That must have been what was broken.

He makes his way up the stairs, slowly, just to make sure he doesn't agitate the three any more than necessary. The room grows quiet, anyway, when he reaches the doorway.

Rosa stands in the center of the room, over a shattered bottle of perfume that is slowly turning the house into a flower garden without the flowers. She's set the tray down, and her arms are crossed in disapproval. Disapproval of the other two, most likely. Annika stands over a chair, a comb in one hand and a red ribbon in the other.

And in the chair...

There's a girl with red eyes. Her blonde hair is only half pulled up into something that must have been intended as a braid, but looks unrecognisable now, probably due to her moving around too much.

He's seen her before, vaguely, but that isn't why she looks so familiar.

### **\*Chapter 3\*: Red Eyes, Take Warning**

The silence only lasts for a moment.

"There you are!" screeches the red-eyed girl. With unnatural speed, she vaults over the back of the chair and attempts to tackle Reinhard. She fails, of course, but why she even thought to try is beyond him.

"Please, calm down." he smiles, politely, even though looking at the girl's face hurts his heart.

She isn't having any of it: "You owe me some explainin', ya bastard!"

"I will be glad to explain, if you just-" he tries, but she hits him with a flurry of kicks that don't reach their intended target.

Out the corner of his eye, he sees Rosa pulling Annika a bit further away from them. It makes sense. The red-eyed girl seems to have some sort of wind magic. It's dangerous.

*It's dangerous!*

The thought hits him, and before he can realise it, he's closed his arms around the girl to stop her from kicking any more. In the fluttering of the curtains, in every crack of the wall, in every struggle of the girl in his arms, he can see the ceiling collapsing. He can still see Rosa's hair covering her face like a shroud, he can still see her curled up between Annika and the stones that crushed them both.

"Please, try not to cause any damage." he stutters, squeezing the girl a little tighter.

She stops squirming: "Okay! Okay, ow!" she yells, "Let me go!"

He puts her down, as gently as he can, and the girl steps away from him immediately, massaging her ribs. Reinhard feels a pang of guilt. He must have squeezed too tight. He didn't mean to do that. He didn't mean to-

"Siddown, ya prick, we gotta have a word." she commands, plopping herself down on the floor with her legs crossed.

Almost mechanically, he obeys. Rosa shoots him a look for sitting on the floor, and Annika tries to point out that he's sitting very, very close to the broken perfume bottle, but Reinhard doesn't want them there. He doesn't think they should be near the girl until he's certain that she's calm and contained. He wonders why his past self had made that decision in the first place. But then, his past self hasn't seen them die.

He smiles at the maids: "Rosa, I think you and Annika should have some dinner. You look tired. I can take it from here."

Rosa doesn't need to hear it twice. With a sigh, she pulls the other maid away and leaves them alone.

The girl's name is Felt. That is about all he could gather, and it still isn't certain.

"Your name is... Felt." he starts, as gently as possible.

"Yeah." she glares, "An' my middle name is *Fuckin' Confused*."

He flinches. That kind of language is... unexpected, coming from a girl her age, but then, Remus did say Reinhard took her off the street. That is the only other bit of information he has.

Reinhard gives her the most reassuring smile he can muster. "There's no need for that kind of language, Miss Felt. I was simply making sure I understood you correctly. How old are you?"

She looks at him like he just spat on her mother's grave: "Like, fifteen. I told ya that already."

His act is slipping. *Get it together, Reinhard.*

"Forgive me," he smiles, "I'm just... brushing up on it. And your surname?"

"I don't have one!" she exclaims, "Didja lose yer memory? I already told ya!"

"I'm very sorry," he repeats, mechanically, trying and failing to ignore how badly the conversation is going, "I'm sorry. I must have forgotten that. For some reason, I was convinced you had a surname."

He knows the reason.

Felt glares at him again: "Yer memory sucks."

He can't help but laugh at that. She doesn't know the first half of it.

Somehow, Reinhard manages to have a somewhat civilised conversation with Felt, where he gets her to promise to be nice to the maids and Felt gets him to promise to let her see... someone. His name escapes him, but it's fine.

They don't have time for that, though, because a quick look at the calendar tells him that the presentation of the candidates for the royal selection is in a few days, and a quick talk with Rosa reveals that the reason Felt is there is that she is, in fact, a candidate. It certainly explains why *past Reinhard* brought her home with him. It also explains why the maids are losing their minds trying to teach her some manners.

Annika is trying to get her to choose a decent dress for a royal candidate to show up in. Felt wants none of it. Reinhard feels rather tired.

The three of them are out on the town; Annika for advice, Reinhard for supervision. Unfortunately, Felt seems to have made it her personal mission to make things difficult for them. She keeps trying to sneak away, and Reinhard spends almost the entire time trying to catch her.

He's really tired. Really, incredibly tired.

And yet, every time he goes still, he feels the stiffness of death again, and he has to move once more. He's jittery, nervous, exhausted, and it's not a good place to be in. Everyone around him can see it. Remus sent him home early, Rosa was just a little less cold today, Annika asked him how he was doing a little more often than usual; even Felt, with her brutal honesty, told him: "Ya look like shit."

He laughs it off, but it sticks. Felt is somewhat endearing, Reinhard thinks, in her directness. He doesn't feel like she would lie to him.

Somehow, through some divine intervention and a few minor modifications by Annika, Felt and Annika seem to have reached a compromise. The dress is yellow, with red details, longer in the back than it is in the front, so that Felt doesn't feel like her legs are trapped. The bust is laced at the front, so she can wear it without any help; the sleeves leave her arms free to move; two ribbons at the back allow her to tie the skirt up in the back as well, in case she needs to run for any reason.



It's a beautiful dress, and the freedom of movement is somewhat reassuring to Reinhard: it means she can run if something goes wrong.

He's only just met Felt, but he doesn't want her to be in any danger. His past self made a commitment that he is more than happy to honour.

That being said, the royal selection is making him nervous for more than one reason. He's going to run into many of the people he needs to check on, he knows, and he doesn't even know how to approach them.

He just... can't wait.

It's a new world for him; it could be a world without the Sin Archbishop of Pride in it. If it is, Reinhard would be content.

If it is, he can be happy with that.

The day of the presentation comes before Reinhard knows it. He's so happy he could burst.

His heart sings every time he sees the city intact, he grins like a madman every time he sees someone alive and well, and the people on the street are all strangers and acquaintances. What is going to happen when he's face to face with friends?

He doesn't know. He might just explode.

In fact, he should probably get it out of his system as soon as possible. Thus, he leaves Annika to deal with Felt's hair and decides to go to the palace early. He might find someone. In fact, all his fellow knights should, in theory, already be there.

With a spring in his step, he makes his way towards the palace gates. How is he even going to talk to people? Could he tell them everything that happened? How would they take it?

It doesn't matter. All that matters is-

*Pride.*

On the steps of the palace sits a lone boy with a dusty suit and a bag of appas on his lap.

Natsuki Subaru, Sin Archbishop of Pride.

## **\*Chapter 4\*: The Threshold**

Reinhard can't feel his hands all of a sudden.

He can't feel anything at all, in fact: his body goes numb the second he sees the Archbishop sitting there, looking bored out of his mind. But he doesn't have time to reflect upon it because, sure as he saw the Bishop, the Bishop sees him.

Reinhard feels a new kind of cold as the boy smiles at him. A cold deeper than any he's ever felt. Why does the Bishop smile?

Why?

Why would he smile?

"Reinhard!"

Reinhard flinches at the sound of his name, called by a voice that is more familiar than he'd like it to be. He steps back. And then he steps forward.

The Bishop is coming towards him, the bag forgotten on the side of the road:  
"Reinhard! I was hoping I'd see you here!"

Why? *Why? Why* was he hoping to see him?

Pride is there, standing there, walking there, looking, walking, closer, closer, *too close* -

Reinhard puts his hands to Pride's neck and squeezes hard.

In front of everyone, he squeezes until he can feel the Bishop's flesh squelching between his fingers, his blood running down his arms. He squeezes until the Bishop's confused, falsely innocent eyes are popping out of his head.

He squeezes until his own throat hurts.

He squeezes until his body goes cold.

"Are you okay?"

Reinhard blinks.

"Hey, you spaced out, there. What's wrong?"

The voice sounds nervous. There's a hand on Reinhard's shoulder.

Remus. Remus is there. He's alive, and Reinhard is alive, somehow.

He was dead a minute ago. Wasn't he? He strangled the Archbishop and something strangled him and now...

"Remus..." murmurs Reinhard, pale as a sheet.

"Yes?"

"What day is it?"

It's as he feared.

Reinhard has gone too far back.

He manages to assuage Remus's worries. Their patrol continues, unimpeded, for its last hour, through a quiet part of the city. So quiet, in fact, that Reinhard's thoughts become almost deafening in the near silence that surrounds them.

In a few days, he will meet the Bishop again, and it will be hell all over.

He killed the Bishop. Twice, he saw him die. Twice, he returned with him to a past he's never seen before.

Reinhard doesn't know what's going to happen if he seeks out the Bishop earlier than that day. He doesn't know whether or not the Bishop is aware of their situation. A horrible thought enters his mind: the Bishop's eyes were wide and innocent when he killed him. There's been differences before, like Felt's presence. Would it be reasonable, then, to assume that the Bishop is not the Bishop in this new timeline?

Not yet, perhaps. Maybe he can still be saved. Maybe he hasn't yet heard the call of the witch.

Reinhard resolves to find the Bishop, no, maybe he should start calling him *Natsuki Subaru*. Maybe the boy deserves the benefit of the doubt.

The only problem is, Reinhard has no idea where he could be. There is, however, a clue to their current relationship in the brief interaction they had before Reinhard strangled him: he knew his name, he'd been looking for him, and he looked happy to see him. Genuinely happy. Maybe *past Reinhard* met Natsuki Subaru under more favourable circumstances, which, combined with the fact that he was sitting out in the open on the day of the presentation, means that someone is bound to know where he is.

Reinhard curses himself for not asking more questions before killing him.

"You're very quiet." Remus points out, snapping him out of his thoughts, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." Reinhard smiles, "The royal selection has me a little stressed, that's all."

"Ah. Ain't that the truth." laughs Remus.

They make it to the end of their quiet patrol without issue.

Reinhard is still deep in thought on his way home. So deep in thought, in fact, that he almost doesn't notice the flash of yellow bolting towards him until it, no, *she* crashes into his chest and tumbles to the ground in a heap.

Reinhard barely has time to open his mouth before Felt cowers away from him.

"I'm sorry!" she sobs, "I didn't mean t— I didn't— I didn't mean to— I thought—"

She can't get through a single sentence without a painful gasp for air. Why is she scared? Why does she look so afraid?

Why is she apologising? Nothing happened, last time.

But this is not last time. Last time, Reinhard came home an hour earlier. Last time, he defused an argument between Felt and-

He's running before he knows it, through the mansion's unnecessarily large garden, which now feels less like a view and more like an obstacle. He runs for only a few seconds, but they're the longest seconds he can recall.

Before he's even reached the second floor, he can hear someone sobbing.

It's Annika, curled up near the window, hugging her knees to her chest and crying like only a lost child could. For a moment, Reinhard can't see what the problem is; there's no blood, there's no indication that she was injured or hit. There are no shards of glass on the floor beside her, even though the sickeningly sweet scent of perfume bathes the room from beside the bed, and the window is... broken. The window is broken.

Reinhard runs to it so fast that, forgetting to make himself invulnerable, he cuts his fingers on the cracked pieces of the glass that still remain attached to the frame.

Rosa looks like a fallen bird, two floors down from where he is. Her neck wasn't always so long and curved. Was it?

Her lips are turning blue.

Reinhard feels sick.

Her hair is full of twigs.

Reinhard feels like he's going to throw up.

Her arm is twisted.

Reinhard looks down, just under him, where his fingers still tremble against broken glass.

Her spine is bent wrong, just like two months ago. There's blood on her chin.

Reinhard struggles to push back every divine protection he has. He slams his head down, into the glass, and hopes his theory is right.

"Are you okay?"

Reinhard blinks.

"Hey, you spaced out, there. What's wrong?"

The voice sounds nervous. There's a hand on Reinhard's shoulder.

Sluggishly, Reinhard looks up at Remus.

"Remus," he murmurs, and his lips still feel stiff, "Can I go home?"

## **\*Chapter 5\*: The Mathers Mansion Family**

Reinhard gets home in time. No one is hurt. The argument hasn't even started yet; it's just Felt and Annika throwing jabs at each other, and it's solved easily enough. Felt was just scared, he can see that now; without any explanation, it's no wonder she lashed out. That being said, once he's had a good talk with her, he knows she won't feel like a cornered animal anymore.

It's a relief.

When Rosa finally leaves the kitchen, Reinhard can't help himself. He throws his arms around her, and feels her back stiffen under his hands.

"Master Reinhard, what are you doing?" she scolds, but she doesn't pull away immediately. Maybe she knows him, just a little bit. Maybe she's figured out that his strange behaviour comes from a place of concern. Either way, she gives him about five seconds before pushing at his shoulder to be let go.

"I'm sorry." Reinhard bows his head, "I'm simply... I'm just a little overwhelmed, that's all."

It's not a lie, so she doesn't call him out. She just nods, tiredly: "You've always been like this. Did you know? You used to run up to my mother, when she still worked here."

Her face, serious as it is, softens imperceptibly for just a moment. Then, she shakes her head: "Nevermind that. Is Lady Felt giving you as much grief as Annika seems to think?"

*Grief* is such a perfect choice of words that he has to laugh.

"No." he smiles, "Not today, no. We shall see how the royal selection goes, though. I think she'll do just fine."

Rosa seems to disagree, but she keeps it to herself: "Of course. There's still time."

*There's still time.*

Reinhard decides to investigate where Natsuki Subaru could be. He finds his answer much more easily than expected in a casual conversation with a fellow knight.

The Mathers Mansion. That is concerning for one reason, and that reason has elf blood and silver hair. If the boy who is to become the Sin Archbishop of Pride and the object of his obsession are in the same place, he needs to hurry.

That's why he gives only a very short notice of his arrival. Normally, it would be a bit more ceremonial, but there's no time to waste. Thus, the letter announcing his visit arrives only an hour or so before he does. He can only hope he didn't cause too much trouble.

He is greeted at the door by a young woman with evenly cut pink hair. She welcomes him with a formal curtsy and a very informal glare, then almost immediately shoos him into a meeting room, where Lady Emilia waits by the window.

She smiles at him: "Sir Reinhard, it's good to see you again! Have you been well? Is Miss Felt alright?"

Right. Lady Emilia was the one to see him off after the fight with the Gut Hunter.

Reinhard bows to her, as is the expected behaviour of a knight towards a royal candidate.

"Lady Emilia," he greets, "Thank you for your consideration. She and I are both well. If you would allow me to return some of that consideration back to you, however, I came here to see how Subaru is recovering."

She looks nervous at that. Why?

"Oh, he's recovered well." she assures him, but her eyes flit all around the room, "Very well! He's doing good."

"May I see him, then?"

"No!" she exclaims, only to retreat up to the wall with her hands folded in her lap. Meekly, she adds: "Subaru is away right now. You can't see him."

"Oh." Reinhard frowns, "Where is he, then? It's imperative that I talk to him."

"I'm sorry, I don't know where he went." she says, but she's lying. He knows she's lying. In fact, she's been lying since the moment she said Subaru was away, which means...

*He's in this mansion.*

Reinhard smiles: "I understand. May I leave a note for him, then? I really need to have a word with him."

She agrees, but she watches him like a hawk while he writes the note. He leaves it facing up, so she can read it, just to show that it's nothing to worry about, but she doesn't look too reassured.

And, finally, he leaves the meeting room. On his way out of the door, he can feel Lady Emilia's eyes on his back.

*Why would she lie?*

There's something wrong with her, perhaps. Maybe her acting innocent after Pride's death was just that: an act. Maybe she knew.

He shelves the question for another day and goes to leave the mansion. Or pretend to leave it. In the corridor, there's another young woman, nearly identical to the pink-haired maid, cleaning the windows. She watches him with suspicious, piercing eyes. He smiles at her and she goes back to her work, but not before one long look across Reinhard's entire body. It's as if she were evaluating how dangerous he could be.

Her evaluation is probably inaccurate.

Reinhard re-enters, unseen, through a different window, one far away from both the maids and Lady Emilia, to look for Subaru.

He doesn't want to hurt him. He really doesn't. He just wants an explanation as to how a seemingly innocent young man could turn into... *that*.

He just needs answers. One after the other, he opens every door he can find, but the rooms are empty. He walks, and walks, and walks, until he senses fear.

There he is.

Reinhard opens the door, perhaps a little too violently.

In front of him is... a little girl. That can't be right. The fear isn't coming from her. It's coming from somewhere else in the room, and he can't help but glance around.

The girl doesn't take kindly to being ignored: "The one you're looking for isn't here, in fact. Leave my library."

There's a closed book in her lap, and a tea set beside her. She looks, by all means, completely innocuous. She's very small.

"Betty told you to leave, I suppose." she says, again, glaring at him with strangely shaped pupils.

Reinhard raises his hands, as if to surrender: "I'm only here to talk to your guest, Natsuki Subaru."

"That idiot isn't here, in fact."

He feels the tiniest twinge of irritation. Why is everyone here so hostile?

"Yes, he is." he insists, "I know he is."

"Betty is getting sick of you, in fact." she glares, "Leave."

"He's here, isn't he?"

"He isn't. You're wasting your time, I suppose."

Reinhard can't help it: "Let me see him." he growls.

The child is unaffected, but the spike of fear he can sense from somewhere in the room only grows. Now he's certain he's found his mark.

Before he can say anything else, though, the little girl turns her head.

"Are you sure?" she asks the air, "Betty thinks that is a stupid idea, in fact."

A pause.

"Fine, I suppose." she sighs, and suddenly, there's someone standing beside her.

It's... a boy, wearing a uniform that's just a little too big for him. There's the source of the fear. Even as he reveals himself, Subaru's legs are shaking like leaves and his face is tight. Still, he raises his shaking voice at Reinhard: "There. Happy? Now leave her alone. Sorry, Beako." he adds, softly.

The girl shakes her head: "You're incorrigible, I suppose."

"It's part of my charm!" Subaru smiles through gritted teeth.

Reinhard has to commend him for finding the strength to step towards the Sword Saint, even as frightened as he is. He's glaring at Reinhard with something that's probably supposed to look intimidating, but just comes off as pathetic.

Reinhard feels sorry for him, almost, but that kind of behaviour is only making him more suspicious. Why would he be scared of Reinhard, if he has nothing to hide? Why would all the inhabitants of the mansion try to protect him?

Subaru takes the walk of shame out of the library. Reinhard follows, and the door slams shut behind them.

Out in the hallway, Subaru smiles at him with chattering teeth: "So, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

That moment is the exact moment that Reinhard realises he didn't think this through. What *does* he want to talk about? How is he supposed to approach that?

*Hello, I come from a timeline where you're a mass murderer?*

Appropriate, he thinks, bitterly. He shakes his head: "I just wanted to see you. I needed to know you were alright."

Subaru's fear seems to fluctuate at that.

"Yeah? You just... barged in here." he mumbles, scratching the back of his head, "Was that necessary?"

"No one wanted to let me see you for some reason." Reinhard frowns, "I worried you might be in worse shape than I'd anticipated."

"Yeah, no, I'm good." Subaru grins, but his teeth are still chattering, "A little mabeast attack, you know how it is."

*A what?*

"A mabeast attack?" Reinhard repeats, "Is everyone alright?"

"Yes, yes." he nods, "No thanks to me, but they are. And— and you? I've been meaning to ask you how you were."

The fear seems to be dissolving. Is he getting confident?

"Fine." Reinhard answers, rather coldly. It occurs to him that maybe there is a way to approach Subaru about the other timelines. The fact that he's so scared of Reinhard when *past Reinhard* has done nothing but help him is forming a new theory in Reinhard's mind.

Innocently, he says: "You know, I was worried. I had a horrible dream last night, you wouldn't believe how awful it was. I had to check on you."

Subaru's brow creases in worry: "Oh yeah? What was it?"

"I had a dream that, on the day of the royal selection, I strangled you to death."

Subaru's reaction is... unexpected. Reinhard expected him to look nervous, or maybe a little amused. Not, as it is, for Subaru to lose all colour in his face and stumble back.

His face looks stiff. His eyes are wide.

It's a bigger reaction than he could ever try to justify, if Subaru really was innocent.

"A... ah..." Subaru babbles, stiff and terrified, "You're right. That... that dream... your dreams are horrible."

"I know, right?" Reinhard frowns, "It's why I had to check on you."

It takes Subaru a moment to recover. When he does, he puts his shaking thumb up and his best grin to good use.

"Well, I'm A-OK, Reinhard! Thanks for stopping by!"

"You're welcome."

"But, you know, I'm a butler here now." Subaru's smile looks painful, "I have a lot of work to do."

"Ah, congratulations on your employment." Reinhard's smile *feels* painful.

"Thanks!" squeals Subaru, "So, I'm sorry, but I'll see you another time!"

"See you soon, Subaru."

*Sooner than you would hope.*

Reinhard walks away with a new, heavy certainty.

Natsuki Subaru is guilty.



## **\*Chapter 6\*: Irreplaceable**

Reinhard isn't happy to have found his answer. Really, he isn't. He *is*, however, happy to have found a purpose for his life in this new world.

Maybe his wish can come true.

Maybe, this time, he can protect everyone. No one has to die, no one has to suffer. All they need to do is be careful, and rely on him.

Reinhard passes the time before the royal selection tying up every loose end he can find: sending letters, talking to people, asking questions, until he has the full story of what *past Reinhard* went through. He talks to just about everyone he can think of; all but two. It keeps him busy, terribly busy, all the way to the day of the royal selection.

He shows up early. Very early. As expected, Subaru isn't there.

Reinhard breathes a sigh of relief. He still has time. Maybe, he'll show up later. Maybe he won't show up at all.

The palace is a veritable collection of people Reinhard hasn't seen alive in months. Each and every one of them feels like a breath of cold air entering his lungs: it makes him feel alive, and yet it stings.

Reinhard would love to let them all know how happy he is to see them, but there are people he needs to see first.

Two people.

It's not hard to find Felix. What's hard is walking to that voice when he hears it; hearing him laugh for the first time in a year; hearing his light footsteps in the hall.

It's hard to look at him and forget about both of their hearts breaking.

But Reinhard does, somehow, find him, look at him; he walks towards Felix, *runs* towards him, and lifts him up in the air by the waist.

Felix meows loudly in protest: "*Reinhard!*"

"*Felix!*" Reinhard yells back, spinning him once in the air. If someone asked him to express how happy he feels, seeing Felix as himself again, no amount of words would be enough to describe it. He would have died ten, twenty, a hundred times if he'd known it would allow him to be there before it went wrong, before Felix vanished into his own mind.

Presently, Felix clings to his arm with a yelp.

"What the hell, Reinhard?" he hisses, startled.

Reinhard can't help it. A torrent of disconnected words flows from his heart, unstoppable: "It's you. It's *you*. I missed you so much, you know? I'm sorry, I missed you so much. You're... don't ever change. Don't ever change. You—"

Someone clears their throat behind Reinhard. Reinhard lets Felix fall into his arms, where he's at least better supported, and finds a green-haired woman smiling awkwardly at him.

"Sir Reinhard, please put my knight down. He's already crumpled up that uniform enough on his own." she says, but her expression suggests amusement.

Her knight?

Reinhard looks down at his friend. It would seem he's not the only one who has found a master in this timeline. Feeling his face flush, just a little, he opens his arms to let Felix go and bows to the lady.

"Many pardons, Lady..."

He doesn't know her name.

"...my lady." he corrects, "I was just happy to see Felix doing well."

She nods.

Felix, immediately over Reinhard's frightening enthusiasm, trots over to his master with a wide grin on his face: "Nyot to sound like a killjoy, but Lady Crusch is expected elsewhere and I'm supposed to accompany her. Nyo worries, though, I'll see you soon, kay?"

Lady Crusch, then, that's her name. Reinhard has to wonder why he has no memory of this woman. She and Felix seem to be at ease with each other. Why doesn't Reinhard know her? It doesn't add up.

He smiles. She seems trustworthy, but he's going to have to ask her some questions later. Still, they're in the middle of the palace. She's not going to try anything now, and Reinhard's tour isn't done yet.

No, wait. She is sincere. He can tell, because it's radiating off of her in waves: the same sincere, pure feeling that Reinhard himself has been feeling all day. She cares. He can trust her with Felix, for now.

"Understood." Reinhard smiles, "See you soon, Felix. Have you seen Julius yet?"

"He's outside." says Felix, "Taking care of some last minute things, you knyow? Always busy, that one." he sighs, shaking his head like a disapproving old lady.

Reinhard can't help but smile.

"Alright. Lady Crusch, I wish you the best."

He bows. She dips her head in acknowledgement.

Reinhard goes to find the last person he desperately needs to see.

Reinhard feels terribly anxious on his way out. As if, for some reason, even though everyone has been alive and well so far, Julius will not be.

It might be because his death was the first to make Reinhard shed tears. His death was the beginning of the end, the way he sees it.

He can't let it happen again.

This time, he doesn't hear Julius's voice before he sees him. Unceremonious as it can be, he turns a corner and sees him walking in his direction.

They see each other at the same time.

But, while Julius offers him a calm smile and a wave, Reinhard runs before either of them can see what he's doing and, in less than a second, he's standing in front of his friend. His hands hover over Julius's shoulders, as if just touching him would shatter the illusion.

It won't, though, and as soon as he figures that out, he collapses in relief against his friend.

Julius goes stiff for a second.

Slowly, though, he brings his arm up to Reinhard's shoulder. It feels just as comforting as it's meant to, and then some.

"Reinhard, what's wrong?" he asks him, delicately, because Reinhard doesn't do this often. Reinhard hears himself sob before he *feels* himself sob.

Julius rubs a circle into his shoulders, glancing nervously at the people passing them by.

"Here." he says, as softly as he can, leading him away from the street and into a hallway of the palace, "Here, it's alright. Let's talk."

He doesn't want to talk. He just wants to stay there and cry on his friend's shoulder, knowing he can hear him, knowing he's breathing. But he's too weak not to follow, and so he follows Julius into the hallway.

He feels tired. Deeply, incredibly tired.

But even that feels okay, now that he knows everybody's still safe.

"What's wrong?" Julius asks him, again, and Reinhard tells him the truth.

"I missed you." he sobs, "I missed you so much."

He can sense Julius's confusion before he even says anything.

"I... missed you too, Reinhard, but this seems a bit excessive for a few weeks." he smiles, awkwardly, "Did something happen?"

"No. No, nothing happened."

"You seem very stressed."

Reinhard goes back to the excuse that feels like it should be the truth: "I just had a horrible dream, a few nights ago. It's been eating at me, just... just a little."

He wipes his eyes with his sleeve and immediately notices how Julius zeroes in on the cuff. Whatever he's seen, though, he shelves it immediately and asks him: "What kind of dream? It must have been horrifying to make you this tense."

Should Reinhard tell him? He ponders for no more than a few seconds, before deciding that anything less than a half truth will get Julius on his case immediately, and he doesn't want that.

"I had a dream that you died." he says, hollowly.

Julius winces.

"I had a dream that poison ate you from the inside out, and you went cold." Reinhard continues, almost entranced, "And I held you, and I shook you, and I tried to listen for your heartbeat, but there was none. I wanted to let go, because I already knew you were gone, but I tried... everything, everything, no matter how stupid, because if I gave up, what kind of friend would I be, right? And I tried for so long to find the murderer, and when I did, the pain only got worse. I couldn't breathe, it was so painful. I had a dream that one day, you just weren't there anymore, and your eyes were empty, and your skin was cold, and that... thing, that body, stopped being *you*. I had a dream that I just... carried on like that, knowing you died when I wasn't there to help you, knowing you vanished without a goodbye. And it was hard to live with that."

The echo of his heavy words has barely faded when Reinhard turns back to his friend with a smile: "But that was just a dream, yes? It's not going to happen. I'm not going to let anything like that happen."

"Of course." Julius offers a pained smile that was probably meant to look genuine, "Of course. I won't let myself be killed. Once I'm dead, I can't help anyone anymore, and you—"

He cuts himself off, but they both know what was on his mind.

*And you need help.*

When Reinhard finally calms down, Julius helpfully points out that the cuff of his sleeve is missing a few stitches.

"We can't have you looking bad at the presentation." he frowns, "We need to sew this back."

"You're right." Reinhard admits, "But I wouldn't know where to find a needle and thr— of course you have them."

Before he's even finished the sentence, Julius has produced a very small box from his jacket and is already threading a needle with the exact colour they need.

"Do you have those on you all the time?" Reinhard asks, tilting his head.

"Yes." says Julius, already at work on his sleeve, "I've happened to need it a few times, so I carry all the colours of the uniform just in case I need to make a quick repair."

Reinhard laughs, and almost cries.

"You're irreplaceable." he says, because that's the only word that fits.

## **\*Chapter 7\*: Underwater**

Julius eventually leaves him to go greet newcomers outside and Reinhard remains alone in the corridors of the palace, looking out at the busy streets of the capital through a second floor window. He feels warmer than before. The sun is shining on his face through the glass. His sleeve has been fixed to perfection, and the whole time, he's felt the strong pulse of life under his friend's fingers.

It's... good. It made him feel warm, and now it's gone. He's alone again. Sure, his friends are nearby, but right now, he's alone.

Should he look for them? Should he gather them, keep an eye on them?

He starts pacing around the corridor. Should he have left them alone? After all, any minute, the *guest of honour* might show up.

Subaru could already be here.

The thought hits him like a cold shower: Subaru is coming from outside, Julius went outside, and he doesn't even know where Felix is.

Reinhard runs.

For the few seconds it takes him to fly his way down the stairs and out the door, he has to grit his teeth and bite his lip to chase away the memory of empty yellow eyes glazed white. He can never seem to outrun that.

He hears voices before he gets there.

"No, you have to let me in!"

"Subaru, please calm d-"

"I can't stay outside here! Please, let me come in!"

He stops to peer beyond the corner. There Subaru is, talking to Lady Emilia, frantic and verging on desperate.

She shakes her head. Subaru turns to another person that Reinhard can't quite see.

"Please, please, you have to let me in!"

"I'm sorry, I don't have that authority." says a new voice, a chillingly familiar voice, that kicks Reinhard's gears into motion.

Julius is outside, indeed.

Reinhard steps out from beyond the corner just in time to see Subaru grab his friend by the front of his jacket.

"Seriously? Ple-" he tries to repeat, but he doesn't have the time.

Reinhard doesn't even have to try. It takes so little strength to pry him off of Julius by the wrists. Perhaps, though, he uses just a little more strength than was necessary when pushing him away, and Subaru falls hard on his side.

Emilia and Julius take a moment to process.

When the stone sinks, Emilia rushes over to her attendant: "Subaru, are you okay?"

Julius shoots Reinhard a look: "What was *that*?" he asks. His tone is polite, but his eyes are wary.

Reinhard realises he should not have done that in public. He doesn't regret protecting his friend, but he does need to be mindful of people's opinion of him, or Subaru could seek the protection of the crowd, or even Reinhard's friends, if Reinhard goes too far in front of them.

"I'm sorry." he bows his head to Subaru, though it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, "I was afraid a fight would break out. I grew agitated."

"You misunderstood." Julius explains, more patiently than he would have, had Reinhard not explained his *dream*, "He was simply worried about staying outside on his own. Given his past experience in this area, I can't say I'm surprised."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Subaru drags himself to his feet, glaring at Julius: "Don't speak for me! I can handle myself just fine. Actually, uh— Actually, I think I've changed my mind, yeah. You three can go inside, and I'll just..."

He gestures vaguely at the city behind him. His eyes keep flicking to Reinhard, again, and again that spike of fear grows exponentially with every movement the knight makes.

Reinhard would rather keep him in his sights.

"No." he smiles, "Actually, Subaru, I think we can find you a spot inside."

"It's— it's fine if you can't." Subaru stutters.

Unfortunately for him, however well-intentioned, Emilia and Julius sign his death sentence.

"Could we? I wouldn't want to cause trouble, but if Reinhard says it's okay..." Emilia ponders.

"I suppose he could stand with the other attendants." murmurs Julius.

"Guys, it's fin-" Subaru repeats, high-pitched, but his words and his breaths are both cut off when Reinhard sets a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Let's go inside, shall we?" he smiles, and Subaru can't pull away.

Reinhard, by the order the knights were given, is to stand in the front. Subaru, to his great displeasure, is placed a few spots away from Felix and one row behind Julius. But he's not going to try anything, not when he's surrounded by knights, and Reinhard relaxes just a little. Ultimately, even if they were to dismiss Reinhard, Felix and Julius will defend each other.

It's only about twenty minutes into the ceremony that Reinhard realises he hasn't been paying attention to anything that's been said. He's a little too busy staring into Subaru with the corner of his eye to listen to the Council ramble on. Until they mention five candidates, and Subaru's eyes narrow in confusion.

*That's right*, Reinhard smiles to himself, *five candidates. At last.*

The door opens.

Reinhard turns back and his smile widens: "Honoured members of the council of wise men, I, Reinhard of the Imperial Knights, would like to announce my mission's completion. The dragon's priestess, the fifth and final candidate for the throne, has been located."

There she is, dressed and combed and accompanied by twin attendants Reinhard doesn't quite recognise. Rosa must have hired them.

Almost hurriedly, he completes her introduction: "Lady Felt."

The crowd is whispering. Some of them know her, some of them don't, and none of them care. It doesn't matter, though, because Reinhard does. He cares, and it's going to be perfect.

Felt glares at him, presumably put off by his theatrics, and waves off the attendants, but then her attention is caught by something else.

Subaru.

Why?

Oh, right. They've met.

"What the heck are you doing here?" she asks Subaru. Well, at least she isn't swearing.

After that, Felt doesn't protest as much as he'd expected her to. She scowls at the crowd, and bites back at Lady Priscilla when she insults her, forcing Reinhard to step in, but she's going along with the selection, for the most part.

Reinhard wonders if it has anything to do with the nervous glances she's giving him.

The situation soon begins to escalate out of their control. The nobles are displeased by the presence of Lady Felt and Lady Emilia and, while Lady Emilia is handling the insults and slurs thrown at her with remarkable grace, they're clearly beginning to weigh on her shoulders.

A shiver runs up Reinhard's spine. She *was* the target of Pride's affections, and he came in with her, which means-

"Enough of your crap!"

There it goes. There *he* goes, and Reinhard would have fainted, had he been anyone else. He doesn't even find it in himself to listen to what Subaru is saying; his head is swimming, swimming in a rising flood of *no, please, no, please, no, please*.

He knows what happens next, because he vaguely hears Subaru mentioning knights and he knows, he just *knows*, that there is someone in the room who will not overlook that.

His ears are ringing

Reinhard turns pleading eyes on Julius, knowing damn well that they'll go ignored.

And go ignored they do, as Julius steps up to deliver a frustrated speech about the importance of knighthood. Reinhard wants to scream. Instead, he just mechanically makes his way over to Julius's side. Just in case. Oh, who is he kidding? There is no *just in case*. There is only Julius painting a target on his own back, like the self-sacrificing idiot he is.

It doesn't escape his notice how Subaru's anger faltered when Reinhard came into view. Good.

Reinhard keeps his face neutral, but his eyes make a point to Subaru: *hurt my friend and you will pay for it*.

The effect that glare has is not what he expected. Subaru stares back for a moment. He takes a half step back, and Reinhard thinks he's diffused the situation for good.

But it only takes one glance at Lady Emilia for Subaru to start arguing even louder. He argues, and he shouts, and Reinhard winces.

*Did he just say that all knights paid their way into their position?*

Julius is not going to take that one lying down, surely. And, lo and behold, he doesn't. Neither do the other knights, rumbling in support of their current representative. Reinhard shoots his friend a pleading glare.

*Stop.*

Julius looks somewhat suspicious. Still, he backs off when Lady Emilia finally snaps and drags her servant away by the wrist.

For now, it's enough.

The room isn't quiet for long.

Soon, it's Felt's turn to be introduced, and it occurs to Reinhard that perhaps Rosa was right to be worried.

She's refusing to participate. In front of a room full of knights and nobles, in front of the other four candidates, she's refusing to take part in the royal selection before it has even begun.

It's fine. Everything is fine. He can always convince her.

Sure, Reinhard can vaguely hear the murmurs, and feel the stares, and see the sneers of the noblemen around them. It's making him nervous. But, he reasons, no one would have the guts to attack Felt in a crowded place. Not in front of the Sword Saint.

Not even the future Sin Archbishop of Pride would be that stupid.

But someone *is* that stupid, it turns out, and it isn't anyone in the room.

Reinhard isn't immediately sure what is happening, when the room fills up with fog.

Fog...

No, it's smoke.

Someone is gassing the room!

Reinhard can feel something barrel past him in the curtain of smoke, quickly. He reaches for Felt.

She isn't there.

His mind goes blank, empty, but for a single thought: *find her*. Reinhard sprints like a beast through the crowd, faster than anyone else could, splitting the fog in the direction of the heavy noise he can hear. He lands, with all the grace of a bird of prey, on the source of the noise. Whatever it is, it's big. And, as all big things do, when it falls, it falls hard.

The thump of what sounds like a body echoes through the room, accompanied by a strange *crack*, and the rest of the fog clears easily.

Only when the smoke has dissipated does Reinhard see and feel his mistake.

In front of him, the same muscular old man he vaguely remembers from the loot house lies on his back, unconscious and likely injured from Reinhard's kick, but that isn't where Reinhard went wrong. Felt must have been slung over the old man's shoulder when he fell.



Still tightly in his grip, she fell, head first, into the marble.

It must have been head first.

There isn't much of a head left.

## **\*Chapter 8\*: Morbid Alliance**

Reinhard knows there is only one way to fix his mistake. It isn't Felix, trying his best to heal an injury that cannot be healed. It isn't Julius, evacuating the room before the crowd can fall into complete panic. It isn't Reinhard himself, either, because his Divine Protections might have grown wiser since his last stint with the broken window and he can't be sure it will work again.

No, it's Subaru.

And, lo and behold, there he is, running into the room in a panic, probably informed about what happened by one of the people that fled the room.

Reinhard turns to him with hollow eyes. He hopes that it isn't pity he can see, etched into Subaru's expression, because that would make what he has to do that much harder.

His lips feel stiff when he talks to Subaru: "If you die..." he murmurs, "I die too."

Subaru's sympathy turns to terror in an instant. He shakes his head, but he's lying. He's a liar.

Reinhard takes one, slow step towards him. Two. Three. Subaru matches his steps, backwards. He looks ready to run.

Well, too bad.

Reinhard stares him down. He can't see anything other than Subaru, because that is his only way out; that is his only way to fix what happened. But, just as he's ready to pounce, someone else steps in the way.

Reinhard grinds to a halt, his hand only inches away from Julius's chest. If he hadn't stopped in time, he would have torn his heart out, and they both know it.

"What are you doing?" Julius grits his teeth, "What are you *thinking*?"

"Get out of my way." Reinhard growls.

Only Julius would have the guts to look the angry Sword Saint in the eyes and say: "No."

"Knight Reinhard, cease this attack!" commands one of the members of the Council, but even he backs off with a single glare from Reinhard.

Julius raises his hands, placatingly: "I know you're upset-"

" *Upset*? " Reinhard roars, but his friend isn't deterred.

"-but the boy has nothing to do with it."

He gestures to Subaru, standing stock-still behind him. Oh, he's wrong. He's so wrong, and he should not be getting in the way, but it's just a mistake. He'll realise, eventually, what could have happened to him, had he succeeded in protecting Subaru.

So he must not succeed.

Reinhard closes his hands around Julius's wrists before he can react. Gently, not to harm, just to move him away. Julius's pointless struggling is making it difficult, unfortunately, but it's nothing that can't be solved.

Why is everyone looking at him like that?

Not one, but three royal candidates and a knight now stand between him and Subaru. Why won't anyone trust him?

"Please, calm down." Emilia's arm is shaking as she points a large spike of ice his way.

Crusch has a hand on the hilt of her sword: "Back off, Reinhard." she commands.

Anastasia is glaring at him, coldly: "And kindly let go of my knight."

Felix is the only one who dares take a step towards Reinhard: "Just tell us what's happening."

Reinhard doesn't tighten his grip, no matter how much he wants to. Julius isn't the object of his anger.

"Move." he growls. None of the people in front of him are deterred in the slightest.

"Move." he repeats, louder: "Move! Get out of the way or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" Anastasia glares, and she's right. He doesn't know what he's doing.

None of the others have a chance to say anything before a weak voice speaks up behind them.

"It's okay."

Subaru mechanically walks towards Reinhard.

"It's okay." he repeats, pale as a corpse, "You don't— thank you all, but stop. Do as he says. Please."

Felix correctly identifies Reinhard's intentions: "He's going to kill you!"

"That's okay." says Subaru, stiffly, "It's not a big deal."

" *Not a big deal?* " Emilia repeats, horrified.

Julius looks Reinhard in the eyes, because he's brave like that: "You don't have to kill him. Just— explain what—"

Reinhard gives his wrists a little squeeze and he cuts himself off with a wince.

Wait.

Why? Why did he do that? He doesn't want to hurt Julius. He doesn't want to hurt anyone.

He might as well, considering that he's about to reset, but he wouldn't. Right?

Shaking with what could be rage, or terror, or panic, Reinhard finally releases Julius.

"I'm... sorry." he says, with a terrible parody of a smile on his face, "I *do* have to kill him, actually."

With the advantage of their distraction, Subaru has managed to slip past Crusch and Anastasia. All Reinhard has to do is meet him halfway.

His fist connects with Subaru's head and knocks it clean off his neck.

The last thing Reinhard hears before blacking out is the sound of several piercing screams.

*I'm sorry you all had to see that*, he thinks.

Reinhard feels himself refocus. He is... not in front of Remus. What? He flips around, in a panic, only to find a room full of knights and nobles.

Oh. It's the royal selection.

And Subaru isn't in the room, which means that-

*Hisssssssss...*

Smoke pours into the room from underneath the floor.

No, it can't be, it's too soon, he hasn't even had time to think about what to do and-

There's the old man, moving through the mist. No time. No time. *No time.*

Maybe he should just let them go, but what if he can't find Felt afterwards? He can't allow that. No one will go missing on his watch again.

He bolts towards where he knows the old man is. Gracefully, Reinhard lands on his shoulder and, before he can react, lifts Felt up like a small cat.

The smoke clears too quickly for the old man to do anything else, and the knights subdue him without effort.

Reinhard takes care to stay far away from him, holding Felt in his arms. The knights have their swords pointed at the old man. Good.

It takes Felt a moment to process what's happening. When she does, though, she kicks and scratches at Reinhard to be let down.

"Let me go!" she screams, but her attention isn't on Reinhard. It's... on the man that just tried to kidnap her. Why is she trying to reach him? It occurs to him that perhaps Felt should not be allowed to move around on her own after all. He doesn't hold her any tighter; he doesn't need to. But she still struggles, more and more.

Her struggle doubles when the man is sentenced to death; Reinhard actually does need to tighten his grip just a bit. She's unexpectedly strong.

Her orders to release the man go ignored. She isn't a royal candidate, after all.

Felt's pupils tremble. Her hands are clenched around the lapels of Reinhard's coat.

She takes a breath and...

"*Fine!*" she screams, "I'll do your stupid selection!! Now put me down."

Reinhard blinks. Honestly, what is she on about?

"Put me the fuck down, Reinhard!" she roars, ineffectively punching him in the shoulder. He isn't quite sure why he obeys her.

Felt doesn't even dust herself off or straighten out her dress. Her crimson eyes are focused, straight ahead and to the floor, where the old man is.

"I am a royal candidate." she proclaims, "So I order ya to let him go. That old man is my family, so treat him with care!"

*Family?*

Reinhard feels very stupid all of a sudden. Of course. She mentioned a grandfather, and wanting to see him, but there just hasn't been enough time for that. He must have broken in out of concern for her.

Reinhard isn't sure of how he has failed to see the clear concern in the man's eyes so far. It seems so obvious now.

Felt waves the old man off as the guards escort him out: "We'll talk later, Old Man Rom!"

Reinhard needs to have a talk with him, too.

## **\*Chapter 9\*: My Fault**

Unfortunately, before he can even organise a talk with Rom, something else comes up. Something important.

Felix decides to go fill Subaru in on what happened after he left. Reinhard, though he has no desire to see Subaru again so soon, will not let him go alone. In fact, he would prefer it if Felix and Subaru never had any contact at all, but Felix can be very stubborn sometimes.

That's how Reinhard finds himself between Felix and Subaru as they converse about what went down just after Subaru was kicked out. They both glance nervously at Reinhard from time to time, probably because of how he seems to be staring directly into Subaru's rotten soul.

Reinhard's ears are ringing, even louder than before. He can barely hear what the other two are saying. His head feels like he's underwater, and Felix and Subaru are above the surface.

His ears are still ringing when Julius walks in. They're still ringing when he approaches Subaru with an aggressive sort of politeness written all over him.

They stop ringing when Julius asks Subaru to come with him. Felix winces. He knows what that means. Reinhard doesn't wince, because he can't find the energy to move a single muscle.

He knows what that means, too, but he doesn't want to believe it.

*A duel.*

No, a duel means that Julius is alone against the madman who took his life. A duel means that Reinhard can't help him without shaming both of them. A duel means blood.

Reinhard's had enough of blood.

Before he knows what he's doing, he's set a firm hand on Julius's shoulder.

Julius stares back at him in confusion: "What is it?"

"Can..." Reinhard forces the words out, "Can I... have a word with you, before that? Can I steal you just for a moment?"

Julius pauses. He brushes his hair away from his face in barely perceptible frustration: "Only for a moment. This can't be postponed, I'm afraid."

"I'll be quick." Reinhard smiles and hopes it looks genuine. It doesn't.

They step away from the room and into the nearby armoury.

Julius stares, for a moment, just enough to find the words, and then asks: "Reinhard, what is this about?"

The words come out of Reinhard before he's even thought about them.

"Don't do this." he pleads.

"I'm sorry, but I will." says Julius, simply, "If I don't indulge their anger, they will do far worse."

"It isn't Subaru I'm worried about!" Reinhard hisses, but his tone softens back to a plea: "Julius, he's going to hurt you. I can't let that happen."

Julius frowns: "The boy has never lifted a sword in his life. I hardly think he can—"

"Well, he *will* !" Reinhard explodes, "He will hurt you, and he will kill you, and if you do this I can't save you from that."

"Why are you so hostile towards him?"

"I—"

Reinhard feels something tug at his chest.

"I know more than you think." he says.

Julius isn't satisfied: "Why? You saved his life, twice. What changed between then and now?"

"You're not going to believe me."

"I can never believe you if you don't tell me what is happening." Julius sighs, and his face softens, "I know you're worried, Reinhard, but I can't let someone innocent get killed with no evidence to suggest he's anything more than a rash, impulsive boy in love."

"I..."

Reinhard hesitates. Of course. Why was he ever worried about Julius not believing him? Julius is his friend. He's believed him on so many things. He isn't going to turn his back on Reinhard's when he's scared.

Maybe he doesn't have to face the wind alone.

"I... I know it sounds hard to believe..." he starts, gingerly, "Trust me, even I have trouble wrapping my head around this, but the thing is... I come from a different universe..."

The tugging in his chest becomes pain, but he closes his eyes and presses on, quickly: "...and when I died I woke up here, before everything that destroyed my world happened! So now, I want to sa—"

*Thud.*

He opens his eyes. Julius is no longer in front of him. He's on the floor, staring at him with the same lifeless, glassy eyes that Reinhard still sees in his nightmares.

A drop of blood slowly runs out of his mouth and down his cheek, like a teardrop.

Somehow, Reinhard knows it's his fault.

Reinhard isn't sure when he started crying. Was it when he heard his friend's body fall? When he gathered his limp form in his arms? When he burst through the door of the room Felix and Subaru were just in, only to find it empty?

Perhaps it was when he ran out to the arena in a panic. Either way, his tears splash down on Julius's ever paler face, mixing with the blood on his cheek into drops of light pink that fall on the sand beneath them.

"*Help!*" he screams, "Please, someone— help!"

Whatever happened to never letting this happen again?

He falls to his knees and it hurts a little, but he can barely feel it. Julius isn't moving. He isn't moving at all. When Reinhard fell, Julius's arm fell, limply, at his side.

Reinhard vaguely hears someone running towards him. It's Felix and Subaru, but Subaru gets there first. He reaches out his hand, and Reinhard swats it away like the most disgusting insect.

"Don't touch him!" he growls, "Don't touch my friend!"

Subaru has the audacity to look hurt at that. At least, though, he deigns to back away when Felix reaches them.

Felix. Felix can be trusted. Felix will do whatever he can to save Julius.

Except they both know there isn't much left to save. He knows that, when Felix's hands start to shake and he bows his head to hide the tears that are beginning to fall from his eyes.

Everyone knows that.

And they know who could possibly be responsible, of course. Subaru, as he's backing away, backs right into one of the senior knights.

They accuse him.

"You killed him, didn't you?" they all say, and they drag him away somewhere Reinhard doesn't care enough about to pay attention to it.

Subaru cries that it wasn't his fault. He screams it, over and over, *it wasn't my fault!*

Reinhard knows that. He also knows that he doesn't want to stay in this timeline. He could never stay in this timeline. But he doesn't have the strength to get up. Not that it matters; if what Julius said was true, he and Subaru aren't going to be alive for long.

That's why he's still there, kneeling beside Julius's corpse, when the crowd, headed by the royal candidates, pour out of the palace to see what happened.

At the edge of his vision, he sees Lady Crusch helping Felix up. Felix collapses into her arms and cries. She means him no harm, he's sure of that now. He just wishes he could have found out some other way.

Lady Anastasia is staring at Reinhard and at the corpse in his arms, he can tell. She's staring, and not much else; maybe she just doesn't have the words.

She finds the words, though.

"What happened?" she asks Reinhard, too coldly to be unaffected. She deserves to know, doesn't she?

But, before Reinhard can confess his crime, someone, elsewhere, deals the final blow to Subaru, and his vision starts to blur. He's going to tell her anyway.

"My... fault." murmurs Reinhard, just before his body goes cold.



## **\*Chapter 10\*: Precarious Pact**

Reinhard opens his eyes, and he's back at the royal selection.

Someone's teeth clack. It takes him a moment to realise they're his. He takes a quick glance behind him and meets Julius's eyes. He's still alive.

Reinhard breathes a heavy sigh of relief. He's still alive.

There's still time, there's still a way to stop Julius, but Reinhard has learned his lesson now. He can never tell him, or anyone, how he knows what he knows, but that's okay. He can deal with this on his own. No one has to get hurt again.

No innocents have to die, this time.

Reinhard is little more than a spectator in the situation with Felt and Rom. He does just what he did last time, because that's safe. That's okay. That only leads to good things.

No, the trouble starts afterwards, when Julius says something, quietly, to the knights beside him. He's already spreading the news of his upcoming duel. That will keep the knights in check for a while, but they will grow restless if Julius or Subaru fail to show up.

It doesn't matter. The important thing is that the duel doesn't happen.

That's why Reinhard excuses himself before Julius can arrive and meets him halfway. Well, almost. He doesn't quite *meet* him, because waiting around a corner for him to walk by doesn't count as meeting him.

Reinhard slinks out of the corner and, as quiet and fast as a ray of light, he lightly taps the back of Julius's head.

That's all it takes. Julius collapses, unconscious, before he can even realise what's happening.

After that, it's just a matter of carrying him into the nearest room. Unfortunately, he has to be left on the floor. Reinhard doesn't want people to think he simply fell asleep, but he doesn't want them to find him so soon, either.

He returns to the room Felix and Subaru were in with his heart in his throat. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. That was the right thing to do. Julius doesn't know any better, but he shouldn't suffer for it.

Reinhard just hopes he doesn't figure out who attacked him.

Felix and Subaru both look nervous when, after a while, there's still no sign of Julius. Subaru, in particular, is staring directly at Reinhard.

Reinhard's heart skips a beat. Of course, Subaru knows. He knows *something*, at least.

Eventually, he snaps.

"Reinhard, can we talk?" he asks. His eyes move to Felix and he adds: "Alone."

Felix gives a nervous flick of his tail: "So rude, Subaru-kyun. Ah, well. I can see when I'm not wanted. I'll just go bother Julius."

"You do that." Reinhard smiles, and Felix walks out a little faster than usual.

Subaru waits for his footsteps to fade before saying anything. When he does, though, he gets right to the point: "You *know* I didn't kill him."

His teeth are gritted and his knees are shaking a little. Whether it's from rage, fear, or both, is anyone's guess. He's feeling a lot of both, Reinhard can tell.

It doesn't matter to him what Subaru is feeling.

"Not last time." he answers, coldly, "But you did kill him."

"No, I didn't!" Subaru growls, "I've never even met the guy before today!"

Before Reinhard can answer him, he presses on: "And where is he now, huh? How come this time he hasn't shown up?"

"He's... indisposed." Reinhard dismisses, but Subaru doesn't gloss over it. His eyes go wide.

"What did you do?" he murmurs, taking a little step back, "That's messed up, man."

"No, it isn't. You are."

"Me?" Subaru scoffs, "I'm messed up? You ju—"

"Let me make something very clear, Subaru."

Subaru goes quiet immediately. There is a spike of fear coming from him. Good, because Reinhard needs him to listen to this. No, he was not the one to kill Julius last time, but that doesn't mean he won't. Perhaps everyone else had a point. Perhaps he is, as of now, innocuous. If he *does* listen, then, maybe this can be solved.

"I see you've realised our predicament." Reinhard smiles with nothing behind his eyes, "I think you've also realised that it takes nothing for me to send us both back."

Subaru gulps. His attempt at hiding it fails.

It seems to be working. "So..." Reinhard continues, "I am... willing to go our separate ways, after today. I don't think I need to tell you, though, that if I suspect for a second that you're doing what I know you're capable of, there will be consequences."

Subaru stares at him. He stares for quite a while, with empty eyes, while Reinhard dips his head and goes to leave. As Reinhard is leaving, he feels a wave of desperate rage behind him. It looks like his words have finally caught up to Subaru.

"Then what do you want me to do?" he asks Reinhard, hoarsely, "What am I doing wrong?"

"Anything and everything that can do someone harm is wrong. Don't do that, and you'll be fine."

"But—"

Subaru cuts himself off. Someone's coming. There are dragging footsteps outside the door, and a voice rings out soon after.

"Reinhard!"

It's Felix.

Reinhard and Subaru sprint out of the room. They don't sprint for long. Felix is right there, helping Julius walk. Julius doesn't look too pleased to be carried around. He keeps one hand on the back of his head; the other is locked with Felix's and seems to be holding at least half of his weight.

Reinhard feels a pang of guilt, but it's all for the better. Nevermind the looks Subaru is giving him; it's all for the better.

Before either of them can be the bigger hypocrite and ask what happened, Felix explains it for them: "I found him in a room close to here. Someone hit him on the head."

"Damn." says Subaru, pointedly, "Who could have done that?"

"I don't know." Julius bows his aching head, "I feel much better now. If you would follow m—"

Subaru interrupts him, looking something close to horrified: "I'm not gonna fight a guy with a concussion!"

"It was only a mild concussion..." mumbles Julius.

"It was *not* ." Felix glares at him.

"No, look." Subaru shakes his head, "I know I blew up back there, and I would love to duke it out with you, but even I have standards, okay? You don't have to fight me."

Good. Very good.

"This is important." Julius insists.

Less good.

Reinhard steps between them. This is where he comes in.

"I will stay with Subaru and ensure that he's not harmed." he offers.

The looks the three give him are not quite the reaction he expected. They all seem to be in silent agreement on something.

Felix voices their collective thoughts: "I think Julius and I can handle it."

No, no they can't. If they're left alone with Subaru, there's no telling what could happen.

Reinhard's smile widens until it begins to crack at the corners: "It's not a problem for me. You should look after Julius until he recovers, instead."

"It'll be a speedy recovery." says Felix, "And it would be best to keep him busy for a few hours anyway, you know, as part of the recovery process."

Julius nods in agreement, winces, and stops nodding. His head must ache a lot. It's too bad, but it's for the best.

"I'm no doctor, Felix, but I don't think that would help him." Reinhard points out.

And yet, concussion and all, it's Julius that comes up with the right solution.

"Subaru has an alibi." he says, "He can't be accused of attacking me, and the duel can be postponed until I have recovered."

*Postponed?* Reinhard frowns almost imperceptibly. Postponed. Subaru outright refused to fight, but Julius isn't in on their conversation. But convincing Julius not to fight would be... complicated, at best.

Julius is still talking: "Until then he and I both should probably stay away from the knights."

"What? Why?" Subaru frowns.

Julius looks hesitant, so Felix takes over: "Because, as it is, they want your head. Until they've cooled down, nyou shouldn't be around them."

Subaru pales a little: "Ah."

Reinhard knows he should cut his losses.

"Fine." he concedes, "But I would still like to stay with you all. At least until Julius has recovered."

"That could take a while." mumbles Felix.

"I know." Reinhard smiles, "That's why I want to stay with you."

There's fear in the room.

Reinhard can't imagine why.

## **\*Chapter 11\*: The Start of Something**

Unfortunately, the plan fails. Both Reinhard's, and his friends'. Reinhard's plan fails because now Felix is watching Julius like a hawk, which means the duel can't be postponed much more than it has already been.

His friends' plan fails because they seem to have underestimated some of the knights; those knights, more specifically, that ache for a fight too much to stay put when a fight is postponed. A group of them soon show up in the room the quartet retired to, and they don't look happy.

"Hey, what's up with this?" scoffs the first in line. Reinhard doesn't remember his name. Either way, the knight shakes his head, gesturing at the four of them sitting awkwardly around a table: "You were supposed to fight the guy, not hang out with him!" he barks in Julius's general direction.

Julius doesn't take kindly to it.

"As you have no doubt learned by now, I am indisposed." he explains, with a polite sort of aggression, "The code calls for me to partake in the duel, but for the sake of my health, it has been postponed until I am able to fight again."

"So you can't fight now?" another knight chimes in.

"It would be too risky." says Julius.

The first knight steps a little closer, and already Reinhard thinks of pushing him away. "You know, if you can't fight I'll be happy to take over for you." he says, smiling down at Subaru with bloodlust in his eyes. Reinhard does not like that look.

"And didn't you say someone attacked you?" a third knight intervenes, "Maybe it was him!" he exclaims, pointing at Subaru, "Maybe he's just too scared to face one of us."

"No." Felix puts his arm out between the knights and Subaru, "He was with me, at the time."

"Are you sure you're not lying?" the first knight smiles. He takes a step past Subaru and sets his hands on Felix's shoulders from behind, and Reinhard grits his teeth.

*That's it.*

Before anyone can move, Reinhard has lightly pushed the knight away. Right into a wall. Oh, dear.

"Please, refrain from touching people without their consent." he smiles, to the surprise and shock of everyone present, "It isn't very knightly of you."

Felix fails to contain a shocked little chuckle.

The knight springs back to his feet at that: "How— how dare—"

"Forgive me for this terrible slight." Reinhard smiles, "Of course, you may seek retribution in a duel, as well. I will do my best."

The man goes pale. Good. Even he isn't stupid enough to challenge a man called the Sword Saint to a sword duel. There's nothing he can do.

And Felix laughed. That means trust, doesn't it? That means Felix still trusts him. Right?

The knights leave the room in a hurry. Reinhard looks back proudly, only to find a very strange expression on Julius's face. He looks like he has trouble believing what he just

witnessed.

"Reinhard," he says, slowly, "did you just push the Duke's son into a wall?"

Oh, that's who he was.

Felix now looks worried: "You'll get in trouble with the captain at this rate."

"It's fine." smiles Reinhard, "I will explain myself. I'm sure he will understand."

They seem to disagree.

Why are they looking at him like that?

The royal selection continues without any major problems. Emphasis on *major*, because as a whole, it's a disaster. The candidates bicker and the noblemen heckle, but at least the worst is past them.

Right?

The day ends, eventually, and by the end of the day, with a little rest and a little healing magic, Felix determines Julius to have recovered from the concussion.

That is a problem. The worst is, it seems, not past them, because the duel is still going to happen at this rate. Today.

Reinhard stares at his friend as he picks out two wooden swords in the armoury. For a moment, he wonders if breaking his leg would be more effective.

And then his eyes widen in horror, because that is a thought he never predicted he would have. Reinhard shakes his head until it hurts. No. Of course he wouldn't do that. Why did it even cross his mind?

Oh, Julius is staring at him now. Well, of course. Reinhard just shook his head like a dog getting out of the bath.

Reinhard smiles back at his friend. It looks like he doesn't have much of a choice. The duel has to happen. Of course, appearances be damned, if Subaru gets within a mile of putting a scratch on Julius, he will end up on the other side of the city in a second. Reinhard will make sure of it.

With that in mind, he settles in the very first row of the arena. If anything happens, he will be there in an instant. Reset, if absolutely necessary.

Subaru knows it too, if the looks he's giving him are any indication.

*Don't fight back*, Reinhard's eyes say. Subaru almost listens.

The duel is short. Very short, and absolutely brutal, but Reinhard hasn't moved an inch. He didn't need to. Not only has Subaru not put a single scratch on Julius, but Julius beat him half unconscious and Subaru's defective gate did the rest.

Reinhard's head is reeling. Subaru only had to stop fighting back. His efforts only forced Julius to beat him even worse, and why would he allow himself to be humiliated like that? He must have a plan. Surely, he has a plan.

Reinhard may have made a mistake once again. Right under his nose, Julius has somehow managed to put himself in even more trouble. If he was on somewhat friendly terms with Subaru before, that has to be gone now. He's in danger once again, so soon after Reinhard's return.

Reinhard will need to keep an eye on him. Subaru and Felix as well, but in the next few days, focusing on Julius seems like a good idea, while Subaru is busy licking his wounds. Felix assured Reinhard that they will both go their separate ways.

That's how he finds himself in a carriage with Julius, sitting awkwardly across from him. He has sent word back to the mansion to get a guest room ready for Julius. Hopefully, he agrees to stay there for a while. Lady Anastasia agreed to it, so it's probably fine for him. Right?

Julius has his hands folded in his lap. He's staring out the window with something like bitterness in the line of his brow.

It's him who breaks the silence first: "I still don't know who attacked me." he says, without warning, and Reinhard almost flinches.

"Are you sure it wasn't just something falling on your head?" he smiles, nervously.

Julius shakes his head: "I woke up in a different place. I doubt an object could have fallen on my head and then dragged me into a room and closed the door on its way out. No, someone hit me on purpose, I know that."

"Well..." Reinhard's smile pulls painfully at his cheeks, "All that matters is that you're safe."

He means it.

## **\*Chapter 12\*: Intermission #1**

Subaru has never felt angrier in his life. He has never been so angry, upset, disappointed, disgusted, sad. A lot of things, overall.

Felix is *not* helping.

"Wouldja stay still for two seconds?" he mews, and his tail lashes at Subaru's arm.

"I can't help it!" growls Subaru, "You're breathing down my neck!"

"Well, which one of us is the healer here, Subaru-kyun?"

Subaru bites his lip and stays quiet. Yeah, okay, maybe Felix does know what he's doing, but maybe he's just being a weirdo. Subaru doesn't know him well enough to be comfortable with him latching onto his back like that.

"Fine." he mumbles, trying his hardest not to squirm away.

"If you play nice, Rem will make you something good for dinner." declares the maid, with her hands on his chest.

Admittedly, their combined healing powers do feel pretty nice. He would be okay with Rem latching onto his back, because he knows her. But at the same time, he hasn't felt any pain from all his bruises and fractures since Felix started his healing session, and that relief is something to be grateful for. Then again, Julius really did go easy on him. Subaru would be angrier if he hadn't just been beaten to death by an entire group of knights. One knight beating him unconscious is a relief just by comparison.

He still doesn't like Julius, but at least the guy has principles that the rest of the knights seem to be sorely lacking in.

Subaru plasters a smile on his face and winks at his maid friend: "Everything Rem makes is excellent! Your promises are in vain!"

"Perhaps I won't make you dinner at all, then." she shrugs.

Subaru deflates. He knows she's joking. He also knows that, if she followed through on that, Subaru would cry. The last thing he needs today is to skip dinner.

But Rem knows that. She wouldn't do that to him.

"Well," Felix interjects, "This is about all we can do for meow. Rest up, will ya? The drowsiness will kick in any second."

Subaru doesn't answer. Felix tilts his head: "Aaany second..." he repeats.

"I heard you the first time." Subaru snaps, "You don't have to treat me like a kid."

"Then stop acting like one."

Subaru almost flinches. He was not expecting Felix to snap right back at him. In a perfectly even tone, no less.

Felix's smile never falters.

"I've had seven-year-old children behave better than this in treatment." he says, calmly, "Are you seven years old, Subaru-kyun?"

"W— no!" he sputters, "I'm just—"

He pauses. What is he? Angry? Scared? Sad? He doesn't even know.



"—tired." he decides. It's not technically a lie.

"Well, okay." shrugs Felix, "I'll let you rest meow."

He leaves. Rem doesn't.

She sits next to him instead, and hits the nail right on the head just like she always does: "You look very uncomfortable around Sir Felix. Why?"

Subaru turns his face away from her, but the truth spills from his lips anyway: "Reinhard."

"What about him?"

"He bares his teeth anytime someone gets too close to his friends." he frowns.

"And yet, he used to call you a friend, too." she summarises, "Are you worried that he's going to hurt you because you're staying here?"

"He pushed a very important guy into a wall just for touching Felix's shoulders." says Subaru, "If he found out that I'm staying here, and that he's healing me, he would put me *through* a wall."

His brow is pulling painfully. It relaxes a little when Rem gently places her hand on the side of his head and pulls him down to rest his head on her lap.

"Then he isn't going to find out." she says, simply.

Subaru is happy she's there. But...

"I feel like I'm in a Telenovela, in the middle of a love triangle." he mumbles, "And I'm gonna get murdered if I'm found out."

"I don't know what a telenovehlar is..." Rem tilts her head, "But neither of those things is going to happen on my watch."

For a moment, he believes her.

## \*Chapter 13\*: Secret

As it often has been in the past few days, Reinhard is greeted by loud voices upstairs. Felt returned sooner than he did, on account of all the complicated procedures regarding the duel, and on account of her not leaving the knights alone until they let her leave with her grandfather, who is currently sitting with him and Julius in the parlour. Reinhard has no objections. Any help in protecting Felt is very much appreciated. The misunderstanding was cleared quickly enough.

Either Rosa or Annika has had the brilliant idea of assigning Annika as Felt's personal assistant, and *brilliant idea* is not sarcastic, because they get along about as swimmingly as they possibly could given the circumstances.

They seem to have become quite informal with each other, he finds out, when he hears Annika yell: "I swear on my mother, Felt, if you don't stay still and let me take these pins out I *will* stab you!"

"Yer doin' that already!" Felt protests in return, but they're quiet for a while after that. They come downstairs a few minutes later, acting as if nothing happened. Felt just looks happy to be back in her regular clothes, and Annika has a bit of a spring in her step.

She hops over to Reinhard with her hands crossed behind her back: "Sir Reinhard, I have a request."

"Yes?"

She bows her head: "In a few days, it will be my birthday. I would like to take a day's leave to stay with my mother and brother."

Her *mother* and *brother*? Since when does she have them? Reinhard's breath catches in his throat. It must mean that the two of them also lost their lives in the three years between now and when his world ended. Perhaps, even their names.

He offers Annika the best smile he can give her: "You know, why don't you invite the two of them here instead? I would love to meet them."

"You... *have* met my mother." she frowns, "Oh, but Adal was in Priestella all this time, so I guess you've never met him..."

"In Priestella?" he repeats, leadingly, "Does he live there?"

"He's in the middle of an apprenticeship, of sorts." she shrugs, "But he's coming back for a couple of weeks to visit. He's a musician, see, because *someone* had to inherit the artistry in this family."

He has no memory of either of them. That means, at any time, they could be erased.

No, that would be terrible. Of course, since he does know them, perhaps he can prevent that. But if they're erased, will he remember them only when he sees them in the next timeline, or will he remember them no matter what?

It may be worth a try...

*No!*

Reinhard shakes his head to shake the thought away.

"You know, Annika..." he smiles, "I maintain that you should invite them over here. I would love to meet your brother."

Annika twirls a lock of her hair around her finger: "Mh, he would probably freak out. In like... a good way. He would love to play for knights and a royal candidate, I'm sure."

"What does he play?"

"A bit of everything, but his love for the harp is unmatched."

Her eyes begin to shine a little: "He's always been built differently, I think. When we were little, he would play everything he could see. Not just instruments, everything. It was like he could find music everywhere. I didn't hear it, but I knew he did. I was a little jealous, honestly."

Reinhard smiles back at her. Yes, whoever this boy is, he's going to be safe too.

And thus, Annika's mother and brother secure an invite to the Astrea mansion.

Only a few hours later, when Felt, Annika and Rom have gone back upstairs, Rosa comes into the parlour with a letter. Her face looks a little tight. Why?

"A letter from your father, sir." she says, spitting the words *your father* as though they were poisonous. What makes her so tense? Why did Julius wince at that?

Reinhard smiles at them, hoping the nervousness doesn't come through: "What does it say?"

Rosa cracks the seal, opens the letter and holds it out in front of her by two fingers. Her eyes slide across the paper a few times. It must be a short letter, judging by how little it takes her to read it. Finally, she frowns and gives them the summary: "He's coming to visit you as soon as possible. He sounds... upset."

Julius breathes in, sharply.

They both look almost frightened. Reinhard doesn't like that. There have been differences before. Has his father, in this universe, done something to intimidate them so much?

Sure, Rosa doesn't love people in general, and Reinhard's father can be a little inappropriate for her tastes. But Julius? He's not easily intimidated, not even by an Astrea. Reinhard would know.

Maybe it's a misunderstanding. His father is many things, and not all of them are admirable, but Reinhard can't remember him ever mistreating or intentionally harming someone.

Yes, it must be a misunderstanding. Still, he isn't going to force them to stay in the room.

"I can talk to him by myself." he smiles, but Julius shakes his head.

"I will assist, if you permit it."

Reinhard really hopes it's not out of compassion.

Reinhard begins to rethink that when, days later, his father slams the door open before Rosa can open it for him. Reinhard hoped their reunion would be under better circumstances.

The first words he hears out of his father's mouth are: "I would like you to explain, Reinhard, what the fuck possessed you to think you could get away with that."

Reinhard bows his head in a half-hearted apology: "I'm sorry, father. As a matter of fact, I did not think."

"Don't get sassy with me!" barks his father, pointing an accusatory finger in his general direction, "What were you thinking?"

"Like I said, I wasn't thinking."

"Damn fucking right, you weren't."

Reinhard is nearly certain that his father is drunk. That isn't out of the norm, unfortunately, but it hasn't happened in some time, from his perspective. He was getting better.

Reinhard's eyes flit towards Julius, as if to ask *are you sure you want to stay here?*

Julius gives him what could only be defined as a pitying look and makes no move to leave. Oh, well.

Reinhard turns back to his father: "I'm sor—"

"You'd better be, because if I get another letter like *this* ..." and his father shoves a sloppily opened envelope into his chest, "...I will never let you forget it, you hear me?"

The letter is, predictably, from the Duke.

Reinhard smiles: "Like I said, I'm sorry. The Duke's son was showing some very inappropriate behaviour and I had to—"

"Shove him into a fucking wall?" his father interrupts, again, "You don't know what you're doing. You're not a kid anymore, so don't act like one! You know who pushes people? Kids, that's who! If the Duke asks for your head, I will give it to him on a silver platter, you hear me?"

It is at that point that Julius apparently decides he's gone too far. Reinhard was hoping such a point would never come.

The Knight of Knights stands up, as elegant as ever, and speaks with gentle irritation in his voice: "With all due respect, Captain, I can testify that the Duke's son's behaviour was indeed unacceptable and, while Reinhard's reaction may have been excessive, his concern was more than justifi—"

"One more word off your tongue, Euclius, and you won't have a tongue to speak with." his father glares. He and Julius remain locked in a standoff of venomous gazes, a standoff which Julius loses when he sees the colour drain from Reinhard's cheeks.

If he could know what Reinhard is seeing with the eye of his mind, he would be more than a little concerned. Because Reinhard cannot sense a lie in that threat. It may have been in the heat of the moment, it may have been the alcohol talking, but his father was being truthful.

It hits Reinhard like lightning. It cannot happen. It can never have even the slightest possibility of happening. And he would gladly make it so that his father and Julius never see each other again to ensure it doesn't happen.

So Reinhard smiles again, because his smile holds extraordinary power. With an even tone, he tells his father: "You're right, father. I *did* push the Duke's son into a wall. And I don't regret it for a second. I don't care if I don't get away with it, either."

Slowly, he begins to walk forward. His father begins to walk backwards in turn.

"I pushed him because he touched Felix. I pushed him just for touching his shoulders. I pushed him because he was harassing my friends." Reinhard explains, slowly, "Now, what do you suppose I might do to someone that threatens their safety?"

It works. His father— the captain blubbers something like *since when are you so aggressive?*

He's out the door in less than a minute.

Somehow, Reinhard doesn't think that confrontation made Julius feel any better. It may have made things worse, in fact, if the way he looks at Reinhard is any indication. And boy, is he looking at Reinhard. Anytime he thinks Reinhard doesn't notice, in fact, but he *does* notice, and it's not very pleasant, if he's being honest. What is Julius worried about? No one is going to bother them anymore; if they do, Reinhard can scare them off easily.

No, there is something else. Reinhard can feel it behind his friend's voice. Something is bothering him, but he isn't saying it. Reinhard can't help but sigh. That's Julius, alright.

It's been a few days since Reinhard's father visited, and the atmosphere between them has been tense, to say the least. Of course, Julius is worried about getting in trouble, but there is something else. Reinhard just doesn't find out until he walks in while Julius is writing something and Julius immediately covers it with his sleeve. It's almost endearing, how he thinks that's going to work. Still, Reinhard lets him believe it.

"Writing home?" he prompts, sweetly.

Julius nods: "Every day. That's the deal."

"Of course." Reinhard smiles, "Annika says her family will be here any moment now."

"I will be there soon."

"Take your time."

It shouldn't be too difficult to *borrow* the letter.

## **\*Chapter 14\*: A Normal Day**

Annika is twisting the hem of her green skirt in her hands. She looks so nervous, sitting at the window like a puppy waiting for its owner to return. Felt slaps her hand away from the fabric.

"Ow!" Annika protests.

"Yer gonna rip it." shrugs Felt, "It's all crumpled up. If I gotta be careful with my party dress, ya gotta be careful with yours."

"It's different."

"No, it ain't."

Annika pouts at her, but leaves her dress alone. Reinhard can't help but smile at them. It's adorable when they bicker. Which is nearly all the time.

"Settle down, girls." Rom grumbles, currently absorbed in examining the sword hung on the wall.

Felt blows raspberry behind his back.

Rosa is too busy dusting off the harp they found in the attic to scold them. She must be so thankful for Rom, Reinhard thinks. It certainly relieves her of babysitting duties. She didn't have too many problems when it was just Annika, but Felt's arrival seems to have made both of the girls a little more mischievous than before.

Reinhard sighs. He smiles softly at Annika: "You look nervous." he points out.

"Yeah..." mumbles Annika, nervously twisting her long hair over her shoulder, "I haven't seen my brother in... well, less than a year. But it feels like it's been much longer. Does that make sense?"

Oh, does it ever.

"It does." Reinhard nods, "Sometimes, I miss people a lot, even if I've just said goodbye to them. And then, a few months feel like decades."

Why is everyone staring at him? Was that too morbid? Oh, regardless. Here comes Julius, walking down the stairs with something weird in his step.

"Forgive my tardiness." he sighs, "I had an important matter to attend to."

"Of course." smiles Reinhard, "I could not keep you from that. I wouldn't."

"I know." says Julius, softly.

Right that second, Annika perks up from her place at the window. Reinhard glances out over her shoulder.

Along the path to the mansion walk a woman and a boy. Even at this distance, Reinhard can see some family resemblance already. It reassures him. These *are* the right people.

That is confirmed when Annika bounces twice in her seat and waves at them through the window. They wave back.

For the first time in months, it feels like a normal day.

Adal and Bertha Ritter are warm. That's his first impression. They're warm to the touch when they shake his hand, and their eyes are warm when they greet Annika.

Adal almost immediately lifts her up in the air with the clear intent of setting her on his shoulder, but Annika gives him one good, precise kick on the shoulder and he gives up.

"Annikaaaa..." he whines, dramatically, "I need my arms to play, you know?"

Annika puffs out her chest indignantly: "Then I guess you'd better not try that again."

Her mother blinks at her: "Have you grown taller?"

"No, she hasn't." cackles Adal, flaunting his considerable height. His eyes are greener than either Annika's or their mother's, and his height is surprising. He positively *towers* over his family.

Bertha, on the other hand, is the spitting image of her daughter. And about the same height.

Reinhard smiles at them: "It's wonderful to see you again, Madam. And wonderful to meet a talented musician, at last."

Adal's face flushes.

Now it's Annika's turn to snicker at her brother: "Flattery will get you everywhere with this one." she tells Reinhard.

Felt is starting to lose her cool. Her cheeks are red with barely contained laughter. Most of it is directed at Adal, by the looks of it.

Annika laughs with her. Reinhard wants them to laugh like that forever.

Rosa soon calls them at the table, though. She fixes her dust pink dress almost obsessively from where she's seated; she isn't quite used to being at the dinner table with the guests, instead of serving them. Reinhard, for one, thinks her dress suits her well.

His eyes, though, soon find the quiet Julius again, seated between Mrs Ritter and Reinhard. Of course, that would give Reinhard easy access to his pockets.

And, as for Mrs Ritter, she is the perfect distraction.

"Oh, he's a charming young man, isn't he?" she winks at her children across the table, for the third time at least. They give her a perfectly synchronised look of disapproval, which she pointedly ignores.

Turning to Julius, she asks him: "Are you engaged, Sir Julius?"

"No, madam." he answers with a politely uncomfortable smile, "No one has quite caught my interest in that sense, I'm afraid. There are many beautiful women in this country, but I am of the opinion that the loveliest flowers are best left in the meadow."

What a roundabout way of saying *I'm not interested*. It's almost impressive.

"Oh, I'm not asking for me." Bertha jests. She winks at Annika, who almost bangs her knee against the table with the violent flinch those words cause her.

"Mother, he's too old for me!" she protests, frankly. After a split second of silence, she meekly adds: "No offense, Sir Julius."

"None taken, miss. I agree."

"Ah, take a joke, love..." Bertha sighs, "As if I would give away my little girl so easily."

She is sincere.

Reinhard laughs from the heart, because this is exactly what he wants. He wants it so badly. The dream of safety he's chasing is all around him, and he still cannot be content. Not until everyone is safe, for good.

He will still be sure to enjoy that moment of peace as much as he can.

Oh, everyone is looking at him.

Reinhard clears his throat: "Many pardons." he smiles, timidly, "You are all so wonderful."

All throughout lunch, not a single noise comes from Julius's pockets. There's nothing there.

Therefore, there's only one logical next step.

Reinhard has planned this perfectly. He has had some time to research the musician, Adal Ritter. The boy has a small, but rather devout following in various towns on the road from the Capital to Priestella. His fans say his performance is entrancing and, most importantly, that he tends to perform with his eyes closed. Now, Reinhard isn't sure how embellished that account is, but he figures it will at least give him enough coverage to sneak away unnoticed for a little. Not during the first song, of course. That would be rude.

But they have a whole concert planned out. All he has to do is get back before the song is finished.

Reinhard sits behind the rest.

Felt and Annika are sitting on either side of Rom, facing the harp, and Bertha sits next to her daughter and holds her hand. Rosa is a little further behind, but she isn't going to notice him. Julius is a little to the right of her, a little further forward. All Reinhard has to do is sit a little ways behind all of them. He sits last, so no one notices.

Perfect.

Adal takes a few minutes to check and correct the tuning of the old harp. Reinhard feels his heart stutter as anxiety catches up to him. He hopes the songs in Adal's selection are long enough to grab the letter and get back without anyone noticing.

Oh, there he goes.

Adal closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and puts his fingers on the strings.



## **\*Chapter 15\*: Ticking Clock**

Adal has a beautiful voice.

Music seems to flow directly from his heart as he pours it out into the room, gently lulled by the strings of the harp. It's a traditional lullaby from Kararagi. And, dammit, it's working. It's working so well that Reinhard almost forgets he had a plan.

*Next song*, he tells himself, *next song I will go*.

The next song sounds like some kind of romantic ballad. Reinhard can't quite understand the dialect it's sung in. What he *does* understand is that everyone in the room appears to be under its spell. He can feel the enchantment radiating off of everyone. They're impressed, pleasantly surprised, maybe; either way, Adal has their attention. Good. This style of ballad is usually rather long.

Reinhard stands up as quietly as he can and sneaks away before the first verse is over.

The guest room is, naturally, neat and tidy, and Reinhard isn't even sure whether it was the maids or Julius that left it like that. Probably Julius, knowing him.

Nevermind that, though.

*Focus, Reinhard.*

Now, where could Julius have put a letter he doesn't want anyone to find? That could be anywhere. Anywhere. Julius knows how to hide things, when he wants to.

Reinhard checks the desk, and the drawers, and the cupboards. Nothing. He searches the bookcase with more speed than he usually allows himself to utilise. Nothing.

Where is it? *Where is it?*

Reinhard almost growls out loud, because he's in pain for no apparent reason now. It's important. That letter is important. Julius doesn't know what he's doing. What if it's addressed to—

"I would like you to explain, Reinhard, what the fuck possessed you to think you could get away with that."

Reinhard blinks. His father is yelling at him. He's in the living room, and none of the people from the party except for Julius are there, and his father is there, for some reason, and he's yelling at Reinhard again.

"I- What?" Reinhard stutters, dumbly. Why did he go back?

He looks down to find he's wearing the same clothes he was wearing days ago. Everything looks the same. He must have gone back, but why?

The answer strikes him a few seconds later.

Right. Subaru.

"Don't play dumb!"

Oh, yes, his father is still there. Reinhard doesn't want him there. Perfect. He can feel his father's anger coming off of him in waves, and it would be scary, if Reinhard was anyone else.

No, it's alright. Nothing is going to happen. Reinhard scared him off once, he can do it again.

"I'm not playing dumb." he answers, flatly, "My ears were ringing. I thought you would deafen me with your yelling, father."

Julius nearly chokes.

Reinhard presses on: "You aren't welcome here. Allow me to spare you the trouble and tell you, right away, that I don't regret my actions for a second. I would do it again."

A heavy silence falls as his father and Julius both struggle to process what they just heard. There's a storm brewing. It's just a matter of which cloud will burst first.

Unsurprisingly, it's his father, though, to his credit, he's lowered his voice a little: "Do you realise what you've done, or did you trade your brains for attitude?"

Such a sophisticated insult is rare on his part, but Reinhard isn't affected.

"My brains are all there." he smiles, "You're mistaken. What I traded was my patience towards that kind of unacceptable behaviour."

"It'll be the death of you." his father hisses, "You've made enemies. If they ask for your head, I will give it to them on a silver platter."

Just like last time, that's where Julius draws the line. He stands up to intervene, but Reinhard beats him to it: "You will have to cut it first. Good luck."

The more his father realises that his words have no effect, the more desperate he gets. His face is as red as his hair now, and his breath, heavy with alcohol, stinks up the room. He's so close to Reinhard now, not realising that, when you've faced the Archbishop of Pride, a cowardly drunk is about as threatening as a housefly.

Reinhard's smile widens a little. Does he honestly think getting all up in Reinhard's face will work to intimidate him? He almost envies this world's Reinhard for being even slightly frightened by something like that.

When his father grabs him by the coat, though, he should have known that would be crossing a line. Not for Reinhard, of course, who stands as calm as ever in front of him.

No, the line that's been crossed was set by Julius. And it's Julius that puts his arm between them, separating them before the captain's drunken reflexes can catch on.

"Please, sir, don't start a fight. It's disgraceful behaviour." he tells him, polite, but firm.

There goes whatever semblance of calm the captain had. He flips out at Julius on the drop of a dime.

"You stay out of it!" he roars, "Get out of here!"

Julius bows his head with perfectly feigned indifference: "I'm sorry, sir, but I am your son's guest, not yours. You can't force me to leave."

"Get out! This is a family matter."

"My apologies, but this is going too far even for a family matter. It would be disgraceful of me to stand by, or *get out*, as you put it."

Julius's eyes look like honey concealing snake venom. His words are the light breeze that precedes a hurricane. It's a rare sight, but it's yet another thing painting a target on his back.

Maybe Julius should not be allowed to move around on his own.

"It's okay, Julius." smiles Reinhard, "Father was just on his way out, anyway."

It's not okay. None of this is okay. Reinhard's father is a coward. He leaves, when the threat posed by Reinhard becomes too great. Good.

Julius sighs in a strange mixture of relief and worry, as soon as he's out the door. And there is the madman of the hour. Reinhard doesn't know why Julius is so insistent on protecting someone who needs no protection, but it's a dangerous habit. It's the exact same habit that already got him killed twice and hurt so many times. It can't be allowed to continue.

Reinhard makes up his mind right then and there.

Julius can't be allowed to leave.

## **\*Chapter 16\*: Stay**

Reinhard passes the next few days as he did before, in relative tranquility. It's not a tough decision.

If Subaru is back home, as Felix said, then something is going wrong for him. However, that isn't exactly Reinhard's business. It will be, if it gets too serious, but he feels a lot more confident knowing where his return point is. Nothing bad is happening, right now. Reinhard can just wait until Subaru figures it out.

Well, not really. That's not really why Reinhard chooses to stay at home. There is another reason he doesn't want to leave. The letter. He needs to find the letter first. Trouble is, it hasn't been written yet. Julius is going to write it on the day of Annika's birthday.

Reinhard decides to stick with his plan. Even if it takes a few attempts, it's the best he can do. He has time.

In the next few days, Reinhard dies twice, without warning. Twice, he goes back. Twice, he fails to find the letter.

He might run out of time at this rate.

That's why he chooses to spy instead. He listens, very carefully, with his ear to the door. His enhanced hearing can pick up on the sound of the pen lightly scratching against the paper. Julius's sigh. The chair's scraping as he gets up. Footsteps. And then... what sounds like the rustle of fabric.

Footsteps again.

Reinhard runs away before Julius can catch him eavesdropping. That's where he didn't look.

Reinhard knows the whole concert by now. He knows that his best chance is the fourth song, a hypnotic ballad lasting about eight minutes.

As soon as it starts, he runs upstairs.

Julius's room is tidy as ever. That's what fooled him. After three attempts and over a week of thinking about it constantly, though, he knows where the letter is. With shaking hands, Reinhard reaches for the pillow and pulls it from its case. A piece of neatly folded paper falls onto the sheets.

Of course he used the lining of the pillow. Of course. Clever.

Reinhard almost crumples it by accident with his trembling hand. He's been searching for this damn letter for days. Julius was way too invested in hiding it for it to be nothing of importance; it has to be something he didn't want to be discovered. It *has* to be something big.

The letter is short, written in simple i-glyphs.

And it punches Reinhard right in the gut with its first word alone.

*Subaru,*

*I understand. I may have found something of relevance as well, but it would be more effective to compare our findings in person. I would advise we meet by tomorrow, since*

*Reinhard is busy today. I will leave this evening at around 6, and meet you halfway. Ask Felix what that means.*

*All I can say for now is that this is not going to get better anytime soon. Stay close to Felix, and do not make your presence known. Reinhard doesn't seem to be searching for you, but no one can guarantee your safety if you attract his attention.*

*Don't be foolish.*

Reinhard can't breathe, for a moment. Not that he needs to, but still.

Has Subaru been with Felix the entire time? No, no, Felix said they would go their separate ways after the royal selection.

They lied. All three of them knew, and they lied to Reinhard's face. And Julius only agreed to stay with him to keep an eye on him. Does he not trust Reinhard anymore?

No, that can't be. Julius is far too trusting. Felix is far too loyal. This isn't their fault.

Letting Subaru leave was a mistake. This entire time, he's been spreading his poisonous words to the exact same people he's already harmed. That's why they're helping him; it must be that. Reinhard still doesn't quite understand how the Archbishop of Pride seems to have twisted so many people to his side. He only knows that Felix, with the dead eyes of a puppet, called him his master.

Felix, the *new* Felix, isn't treating Subaru like his master, or any kind of superior. Quite the contrary. So what changed?

Well. Reinhard did warn Subaru there would be consequences.

Perhaps another chat is in order.

Julius is stirring his tea in a sort of elegant, dazed state of reflection. He looks pensive, to say the least, and the fact that he has been stirring for two full minutes without realising it certainly doesn't help his case.

He has told Reinhard that he's going back home. That is a lie, but Reinhard does a good enough job pretending he believes him that Julius doesn't suspect a thing. They're having afternoon tea together, not long after two thirds of the Ritter family have packed up and left for an *important matter*. Merchants and musicians often have such habits. Julius is supposed to leave too, in about half an hour. Everything is packed for him.

It's too bad Rosa had to do all that work. He's going to be extending his stay quite a bit, in reality.

"So," Reinhard smiles pleasantly, "You're going straight home?"

"Yes." Julius lies, "I'll return to work tomorrow, if they let me. You know how it is."

"Yes, yes, we must be careful with that head of yours." Reinhard sighs, "I'm grateful you chose to stay with me. It would have caused me great anxiety to be separated from you right as you were recovering."

"I had already recovered." Julius mumbles, almost salty, "I'm not sure why Felix insisted on giving me a leave anyway."

*Liar.*

"Felix cares a lot, I believe. That's why."

"Still..."

Julius takes a long sip of his tea. Every movement he makes is precise and elegant as always. Yes, he's recovered, alright. He has had no health issues whatsoever in the past few days. Reinhard is thankful for that, he really is. He would have hated to cause lingering damage.

Reinhard taps his finger against the edge of his plate.

1...2...3...

"You know, Julius, there is something I don't understand."

...7...8...9...

"What would that be?"

"Why did it have to be you?" Reinhard asks, innocently, "You could have left the duel to someone else. Someone less angry than those knights. You know, not all of them took it so personally."

...16...17...18...

Julius answers without hesitation: "No one else needed to be involved. I was the one who confronted him in the first place. It was only right that I should follow through."

"Mh." Reinhard nods, "So it's a matter of honour, then?"

"No."

...29...30...31...

"No?"

"It isn't simply a matter of honour." Julius shakes his head lightly, "If I hadn't stepped up, it wouldn't have been one of the knights indifferent to Subaru who would have volunteered. I guarantee it. It would have been one of those that wanted him dead."

Reinhard feels a small sting of irritation: "So, it was a matter of protecting him."

"In so many words, yes."

...47...48...49...

"You're too kind, Julius." Reinhard shakes his head with a sigh, "You were almost in trouble, there. It could have turned out very bad for you."

"No price I could have paid for that would have been too steep." says Julius, sharply, "I would not leave an innocent to die. No one should, if they have any power at all to stop it."

...55...56...57...

It's beginning to work. Julius just stuttered. And even dropped his spoon into the cup. Clumsiness is so rare on his part.

...58...59...60...

Perfect timing. That shiver down Julius's back means it's working.

Reinhard smiles at his friend: "You're right. I apologise. You did what was just, and I commend you for that. But, Julius..."

"Yes?"

"You look spent, my friend."

Julius blinks rather sluggishly: "I'm perfectly fine. I should go."

"No, I think you should stay, actually."

Reinhard is at his side in an instant. He helps him up. Julius doesn't seem to realise it until he's standing, leaning a little too heavily on Reinhard's arm.

"I have to go." he repeats, slowly.

"You don't have to go." Reinhard speaks like he would speak to a child, "I'll send a letter and say you're too exhausted. I'm sure they'll understand."

Whatever spark of lucidity still remained in Julius's eyes flickers.

"No." he repeats, almost petulant, "No, I have to go. Reinhard, I have to leave."

"You don't have to do anything. Is something wrong?"

"I have to leave."

"No, you don't. You're safe here."

"No, I have to... I have to..." Julius stutters. He blinks sluggishly: "...stairs?"

"Yes, those are the stairs." Reinhard explains, patiently, "You need rest."

"No." repeats Julius, weakly, but he makes no attempt to get off of Reinhard's shoulder. How could he? He barely realises what is happening. His muscles are betraying him, and all he can do is follow obediently. He isn't going to rebel now, for once.

"No." Julius repeats, again and again, but that's all he can do.

Reinhard gets him back to the guest room without issue. By the time he reaches the bed, Julius has almost entirely collapsed. His eyes are open, slowly blinking, but that is the only indication that he's still conscious. He isn't protesting anymore, or even attempting to walk, and Reinhard has resorted to carrying him with both arms.

He doesn't say anything at all until Reinhard lays him down, at which point he just looks Reinhard in the eyes and repeats, one final time: "I have to go."

"No," Reinhard smiles, "You have to stay."

He holds his friend's hand until he can feel it going completely limp in his grip.

"You're safe here." he repeats, just as Julius's eyes fall closed.

Reinhard locks the door on his way out. With some luck, he's going to be back before the effects of the medicine wear off.

Reinhard leaves. He doesn't want to be late.

## **\*Chapter 17\*: Intermission #2**

Rosa knocks on the door for the third time. Yes, Sir Reinhard told her that his friend has just fallen asleep, but from what she knows of Sir Julius, that is simply not realistic. Neither is it possible for either of them to have made her pack his bags if they knew he wasn't going to leave.

The door is locked, and the key isn't there. Even more suspicious. There is usually a copy of the key hidden outside the guest rooms in case of an emergency, but the one that was supposed to be there is gone, which can only mean the door was locked from the outside and whoever locked it took the key with them.

*Whoever* locked it... Rosa does not want to make assumptions, but the last person to go in there was Sir Reinhard, as far as she knows.

Rosa could technically open the door, yes, but she doesn't want to damage the lock. Fortunately, just as she's starting to consider asking Mr Rom, Annika and Lady Felt come upstairs, bickering as per usual.

"Lady Felt." calls Rosa.

The girls stop in their tracks and look at her with question marks in their eyes.

Rosa points at the door: "I'm worried Sir Julius might be feeling ill. Do you know how to pick a lock?"

The girl tilts her head: "Who do ya take me for?"

Yes, perhaps that was inappropriate to ask of a royal candidate, but—

"Of course I can pick a lock!"

*Ah.*

Rosa begins to reconsider her actions when they find that Sir Julius is, indeed, fast asleep. Were it not for the fact that he's fully dressed, and lying haphazardly on top of the covers. That doesn't quite line up with what she knows about him.

Fortunately, she's saved from having to make a decision by Lady Felt, who wastes no time grabbing the knight's arm and shaking it around. There is no reaction on his part.

Rosa is starting to worry that his sleep may not be natural. He has a pulse, but it's remarkably slow, and his breathing is perfectly regular even after Felt shook him around.

"Annika." she says, and the little maid snaps to attention immediately.

"Yes?"

"You attended to them this afternoon, didn't you?"

"Yes, madam."

"What did he eat?"

Annika's brow knits together in thought: "Just a few biscuits, I think. He looked nervous."

"And what did he drink?"



"Tea. I didn't see what he put in it, though, Sir Reinhard dismissed me." she answers, diligently, twisting her long chestnut braid with twitching hands.

Rosa begins to put something together.

"What tea was it?"

Annika hops into the kitchen and emerges from a cupboard with a small jar full of dried leaves. Nothing about them looks off, but Rosa has never seen them before. It's strange. Sir Reinhard is a creature of habit when it comes to what he drinks. And the care with which Annika treats the jar, holding it as far from her face as possible, is giving her a strange feeling.

Rosa examines the jar: "I don't understand. I don't recognise this tea. It isn't labelled, which means I didn't buy it. I always label them."

Felt is watching from beside her. She reaches over Rosa's arm and takes a sniff of the contents of the jar. Her nose twists: "Ew. Why'd ya make this one?"

"Sir Reinhard specifically asked for this one!" Annika exclaims, clearly embarrassed, "I don't know what that is! He always tells me which tea to make. I just make it."

"Well, kay." Felt pops her head out of the kitchen and yells, very loudly, across the lobby: " *Hey, Old Man Rom!! Get over here!!* "

"I'm coming, I'm coming." he grumbles back after a few seconds. Heavy footsteps echo through the corridor and, soon after, he crouches to try and pass through the little door of the kitchen, made for people of a far smaller build than his. He fails.

Felt hands him the jar through the doorway: "Whaddaya say? What's this stuff?"

Rom turns it over in his hand for a moment. He puts his eye to the edge of the jar, takes a brief sniff, plucks a leaf to examine it closer.

He looks... alarmed. Oh no.

"Did any of you sniff or taste this?" he asks. Annika and Rosa give Felt a synchronised look.

Felt waves them off: "Eh, I feel fine."

She walks a few steps to grab an apple from the fruit basket, stumbles, and grasps the counter for support.

"What...?" she murmurs.

Rom sighs heavily as Annika helps her lady regain balance.

"I dunno where you found this, kid, but this is Whale's Tooth."

Annika loses some colour in her face: "What?"

"Whale's Tooth." he repeats, "A very strong relaxant. A sniff won't do much beyond making you drowsy for an hour or two, though, so you'll be fine."

"So that's why I felt so dizzy after making it..." Annika recalls, quietly.

Rosa finally has all the pieces. A chill runs up her spine.

"And if you were to ingest it?" she asks.

"Well..." Rom scratches his chin, "I guess it depends on the quantity, in proportion to the person's size, but ideally, it's supposed to make you fall into a deep sleep. The

effects can last up to two days, with the highest dose you can give someone without killing them. Confusion, drowsiness..." his tone drops further and further as he starts to see the full scope of their question, "Some people have been known to lose their memory after eating it. That's why they named it that."

A heavy silence falls upon the group.

Rosa finally has to face the facts. She doesn't know her master. She thought she did, but the person she knew would never intentionally do something like drugging a friend. More painful still, though, there is another truth she's been putting off.

For the longest time, he looked like a child in her mind. Now, he barely looks like a person.

"We..." she murmurs through stiff lips, "I have to do something."

## **\*Chapter 18\*: Meet Me Halfway**

*Meet me halfway* means something different to Julius and Felix than it does to most people. Unbeknownst to Julius, Reinhard is in on the secret.

What he meant by the code *meet me halfway* was to meet him at the halfway point between two very specific towns. This coincides with a park often frequented by rich merchants and the like. Well, until merchants and the like had a massive, slightly suspicious, spike in business, that is. At nighttime, no one ever goes there. Merchants aren't the type to waste precious hours of sleep in a park that, quite frankly, becomes particularly unsettling as soon as the light leaves it. However, it isn't *technically* illegal to enter at night.

That is where Julius set the appointment. Clever, but not clever enough.

Reinhard, despite all his worrying, arrives early, or at least earlier than Subaru. He lies in wait beyond a patch of verdant trees. The wait isn't long.

Soon enough, the old gate to the park creaks open. In comes Subaru, radiating what seems to be a mix of urgency and restlessness.

"I'm here!" he loudly announces, because he's either brave or stupid or both. Or just impatient.

Upon seeing the park seemingly empty, Subaru mumbles something along the lines of *him of all people*. Reinhard puts on his best smile and walks out from beyond the treeline.

"Good, you're just on time."

Whatever healthy colour was on Subaru's cheeks drains away in an instant. He stands, frozen, in front of Reinhard, and if there was any hope in him when he walked in, it has since fled.

"Julius couldn't make it." Reinhard smiles, "Don't blame it on him, though. He tried his hardest to hide that letter from me. If I didn't have so much time, I wouldn't have found it."

Subaru's stiff lips force out one of what are, no doubt, many questions on his mind:

"Where... is he?"

"Safe now."

"That's not what I asked." Subaru grits his teeth, "Where is he now?"

Reinhard frowns imperceptibly: "He's at home, safe. Does that disappoint you, Subaru?"

"No, it—" Subaru changes his mind about his answer halfway: "Well, I wasn't expecting *you*. "

"I know."

"Why are you here?" Subaru asks in the way one would ask a question they know the answer to.

Reinhard gives it anyway: "I'm here to ask you some questions. I am expecting no less than an honest answer, and I'll know if you're lying."

He takes one step towards Subaru. Subaru takes a step back.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that." warns Reinhard, "I'm faster than you."

Subaru's teeth start to chatter. He's staring at Reinhard with wide, mean eyes; his jaw is tense, his fists are clenched, his legs twitch with the urge to run away. As if he could.

"Then what..." he says, strained, "...am I supposed to do, huh? Just wait for you to walk over and—"

He cuts himself off, because even he doesn't know what Reinhard is going to do.

Reinhard tilts his head: "You don't need to be so afraid, Subaru. If you tell me the truth, it'll be easier for both of us."

Subaru's fists are clenched so tightly that his nails must have carved little crescents into his palms by now. He gives one more squeeze, and a drop of blood runs down from under his right middle finger.

"What do you want to know?" he forces out.

Reinhard smiles. Good. He's being so cooperative.

"Where have you been staying?" he asks, as a warm-up question. The letter made it pretty clear where he's been staying.

Subaru probably knows that, because he slowly answers: "The Crusch camp."

It's the truth.

"With Felix?"

"Not just him." Subaru says, hurriedly, as if he were afraid for Felix. And why would he be?

" *Not just him*, " Reinhard nods, "Who else, then?"

Subaru hesitates. In fact, he doesn't answer at all.

"Who else?" he repeats, clearly stalling, "I— I mean, it's a big camp. Lots of people. Yeah."

"Mh." Reinhard nods, "But it's Felix who told you to come here, isn't it?"

"No, Julius did."

"I mean, in this park." he clarifies, "I don't suppose you knew where this was before then."

"I didn't."

Another truth. Good, Subaru's listening. Maybe they can both walk away without issue.

Now for a slightly more difficult question.

"Why are *you* the one that came here?"

"Huh?" Subaru stutters.

His confusion is genuine, this time, so Reinhard clarifies: "Why did *you* , and not Felix, come to meet Julius?"

He isn't answering. Why isn't he answering? The question is important. He's done well so far.

*Don't stumble now, Subaru.*

"Please, answer the question."

Subaru stutters something unrecognisable.

"I didn't hear that." says Reinhard.

Subaru gulps and repeats, louder and clearer: "I don't know."

That one is a lie. A very obvious lie, no less. Reinhard is almost disappointed.

"That isn't true, Subaru." he says, slowly.

"No, I don't know." repeats Subaru. As if.

Reinhard takes a step forward.

"I don't know!" cries Subaru, putting his arms out in front of himself as if bracing for a terrible impact. Instead, Reinhard just takes a gentle hold of his right arm.

Subaru seems confused, for a second. His fear abates and his arm doesn't flinch away from the touch. His eyes could almost pass for innocent eyes.

Almost.

Reinhard smiles: "It isn't wise to lie to me, Subaru."

*Crack!*

Subaru screams, long and loud. It's only a minor fracture, but Reinhard's always been told it hurts.

Now he's trying to get away. Bad plan. It's only jostling his arm.

"Now, would you please tell me why you're really here?" Reinhard smiles, coldly.

Subaru's fear, as it often is when he's cornered, morphs into anger.

"Didn't you read the letter?" he yells, baring his fangs like a trapped beast, "I— you caught us, okay? We were gonna exchange information—"

Reinhard squeezes a little tighter. Subaru's a good liar sometimes, but not good enough.

"Yes, Julius was." Reinhard nods, "I'm a little hurt that he agreed to stay with me just to keep an eye on me, though. So, did you tell him to do that, too?"

"I didn't— I didn't tell him to do anything." Subaru whimpers, "It was *their* plan, okay? They— Felix was supposed to keep an eye on me, and—"

"So how come he's not here?"

"Because he's got better things to do than deal with *your* shit, Reinhard!" Subaru roars. He tries, once again, to pull away. It only worsens the ever worsening fracture.

Subaru barrels on: "He told me to go, okay? Because— because he says that we should talk about the... the duel, and—"

"Right. *Talk.*" Reinhard frowns. Sarcasm isn't his style, normally, but Subaru brings out all the worst parts of him.

"Yes, *talk!*" growls Subaru, "Because— Because he doesn't like it when his friends fight. He told me to come here, okay?"

"Okay." says Reinhard, calmly, "I will go find Felix later..."

"No—!"

"...and if there is a single scratch on him, you will receive it tenfold." he continues, "If he is at all different from the last time I saw him, you'd better hope I don't find you."

Why did Subaru look so distressed when Reinhard mentioned going to find Felix? Is that... *worry*, coming off of him? Something is wrong. Reinhard should finish this quickly. Next time, he won't be so careless.

Subaru's face morphs once again into the face of a rabid beast.

"You're insane!" he screams, "I didn't do anything! I've never done anything! I— what have I ever done, huh?"

Reinhard's face darkens.

He releases his death grip on Subaru's arm and Subaru falls on his back. Reinhard casually kicks at his left leg.

*Crunch*

Subaru won't be running away anytime soon.

Between Subaru's screams and sobs, Reinhard repeats: "Yes, what *have* you done, Subaru? What have you done to make them trust you? What have you ever done to convince them you deserve to be protected?"

As he steps forward, Subaru crawls backwards.

He continues, undeterred: "What have you done to make them think *you* are the one that needs to be protected?"

One look into Subaru's eyes and his rage boils to the surface. Reinhard grits his teeth, dragging Subaru up by the neck.

"What..." he growls, and his voice cracks, "...have you done to them?"

Subaru's eyes, teary and lost, glaze over. He's not dead. His pulse still races frantically under Reinhard's fingers. He's not dead, but he looks like he wishes he was.

"I... haven't done anything." he rasps out. Tears of pain roll freely down his cheeks. He really does look pathetic. "I haven't done anything..." he repeats, "Nothing... Nothing for or against them. They've been so kind to me. I thought... I thought you would be, too."

Reinhard grits his teeth and squeezes just a little. Subaru coughs. Frantically, clawing onto Reinhard's wrist with his good hand, flailing his legs around, he continues: "I haven't done anything! I don't wanna hurt them, I swear, I don't wanna hurt them, I don't want *you* to hurt them! I like Felix! I like that he doesn't let me push myself too hard, but he doesn't go easy on me! And— and I don't hate Julius, or I wouldn't be here! I would never—"

Reinhard cuts him off with another squeeze.

"It's easy to say that: *I would never*." he hisses, through his teeth, "I'm sure you must have said that before, at some point. It was a lie then, and it's a lie now."

He drops Subaru to the ground when he sees him too close to losing consciousness. Subaru coughs and gasps for air, trying to crawl backwards on his good arm and leg.

No questions were answered, except for *is Subaru a liar?*

Reinhard can't let him go back to the Crusch camp.

"You're coming with me." he says, coldly. Just as he reaches out his hand, though, something flies towards him from behind. It's immediately deflected by Reinhard's

divine protections, but he is well aware that it would have taken his head off if he didn't have them.

Reinhard looks back at the darkness.

As the sound of dragging chains approaches, Subaru goes pale.

There's someone there.

And they're angry.

## **\*Chapter 19\*: From The Darkness**

Subaru cries out in an unholy mixture of relief and fear that washes over Reinhard like a tidal wave. From the darkness, instead, he senses nothing but pure, flaming rage. Whoever is there is angry.

"Show yourself." Reinhard commands, "Show yourself or leave."

He spots the end of the chain he heard. Attached to it is a heavy metal ball, covered in sharp-looking spikes.

Someone pulls on the chain and the ball is dragged off into the darkness.

Footsteps. There are footsteps coming towards Reinhard, and a light in the dark, creating a sort of pink halo around the head of a blue-haired girl. It's... a horn. An oni, then, though one that's apparently missing a horn.

Her eyes, a piercing sky blue not unlike Reinhard's, are full of rage. The ball now dangles from the chain clenched tightly in her hands.

"Don't touch my Subaru-kun!" she howls, baring her teeth at Reinhard like a wild dog.

She's there to save him, and yet, Subaru's fear only seems to grow when she reveals herself. Why?

Well, Reinhard doesn't know her. She doesn't need to get involved.

"Please, leave, miss." he smiles, "If you didn't leave, I would have to fight you. I would rather avoid that."

Subaru's eyes widen. He drags himself up to his good elbow: "Yeah!" he exclaims, "Yeah, Rem, don't— it's okay, just leave!"

The girl— Rem— begins to spin the spiked ball above her head. Her only response is to once again attack Reinhard. Once again, it fails. The ball, deflected, crashes into a tree, sending wood splinters flying everywhere.

Reinhard sighs.

Subaru screams: "Rem, *go!* "

Rem tugs on the chain and the ball returns to her hand. No sooner has she retrieved it than she's already lunging at Reinhard with a beastly howl of rage.

Reinhard doesn't need to do much. He lightly taps the side of her shoulder, and Rem goes flying head first into the fence with a loud *clang* , denting the iron under her weight. That should keep her out of the way for a while. She's an oni, so it won't kill her, but it must have done something, because she's gone quiet.

Too quiet.

The light is gone from where her horn was.

Reinhard begins to worry a little. He wouldn't want to cause unnecessary damage. He takes one, hesitant step towards the girl, and feels a tug on his ankle.

It's Subaru. He's grabbed onto his ankle. His teeth are gritted, his brow is pulling painfully, his eyes are popping out of his head. He's fighting through a remarkable amount of pain just to hold on to Reinhard.

Reinhard pulls away, and Subaru lunges forward to grab him again.



"Stop." says Reinhard, coldly, "Or I'll break your other arm, too."

Subaru growls like a beast. He looks him in the eyes, acknowledges the warning, and then reaches for Reinhard again.

Well, he was warned.

Reinhard leans down to make good on his threat.

"Reinhard!"

He doesn't know that voice. Why does it speak like it knows him?

Reinhard looks up to find an old man he doesn't know. He's dressed much too sharply for the two swords hanging at his sides. And he's acting like he knows him. Yet another of *past Reinhard's* acquaintances, presumably.

Reinhard smiles at him, too: "Please leave, sir."

The old man draws both of his swords.

"What's got into you, Reinhard?" he yells, "Let him go!"

Oh, he's there for Subaru, too? Well, isn't that a funny coincidence? The situation is worse than Reinhard had imagined. It's clear to him now that he should not have left Subaru alone. All of these people are trying to defend him... he's burrowed too deep into them for Reinhard to be able to save these strangers. What a parasite.

Reinhard looks down at Subaru with scarcely concealed indignation in his eyes: "You must be an excellent actor."

"Subaru!"

He looks back at where the old man was and his smile fades in an instant. Not five feet behind the man stands the exact person that Reinhard has failed the most by letting Subaru go free the first time.

Felix looks horrified.

"Why—" he stutters, "W— Get away from him!"

Felix looks ready to fight him, no matter how unfair such a fight would be. Of course. He's been stuck with that maniac for days, and days was all it took.

"Fe... lix..." Reinhard stutters. He's sorry. Truly, deeply sorry, for leaving him to the same madman that broke him last time.

And still, Reinhard finds a smile for him, because he needs a smile.

"It's going to be alright," he promises, "I'm going to save you."

"What are you talking about?" cries Felix, but he doesn't get very far.

The oni girl is just starting to get up again. It keeps Subaru distracted, enough so that he doesn't have time to scream when Reinhard stomps on the base of his neck.

"I would like you to explain, Reinhard, what the fuck possessed you to think you could get away with that."

Reinhard pops his neck. That was unexpectedly painful. Broken bones really do hurt, don't they?

"Don't ignore me!"

Oh, right. His father is there.

Reinhard just smiles at him: "I don't have time for you right now. Please leave."

"I told you I was coming days ago!" growls the very drunk captain of the guards.

"I know." says Reinhard, "Something came up."

Julius gives him a strange look, but doesn't say anything. As predicted, though, just saying he's busy isn't quite enough to get Reinhard's father off his back. He grumbles and yells and tries to make himself look imposing in front of Reinhard. It doesn't work.

It works so poorly that he eventually has to leave, lest Reinhard knock his head off of his neck.

Perfect. Only one obstacle left now.

Reinhard turns to smile at Julius: "Can we talk? Over tea, perhaps?"

Reinhard has finally come to a conclusion.

The world is too big even for him to hold in his arms. But *the* world isn't what he needs; all he needs is *a* world, where everyone inside is alive and safe. It may be a small world, but it's his. To create it, all he needs to do is just gather everyone and then close the door.

It won't do any good to just threaten Subaru. He can't go to the source of the problem, because the source of the problem can time travel. So he decides to try something else.

*I'm going to save you.*

That was his promise. Even if Subaru isn't around, Felix will still be stuck with the other two, and whoever else Subaru has managed to brainwash to his side. Reinhard knows Subaru already has his claws into the healer, but they haven't cut to the bone yet at this point, right? Right?

Right. Regardless, Reinhard knows now that Felix has been in danger the entire time. The best he can do is take him out of the danger and into his world, because his world is *safe*, and nothing bad will ever touch them there.

As he locks the door on Julius, he smiles.

One down, quite a few more to go.

## **\*Chapter 20\*: The Wind of Truth**

It doesn't take very long for Reinhard to reach the Crusch camp. When he does, though, it's without warning and Lady Crusch does not appreciate it.

"It is protocol to warn of your arrival here." she sighs, sheathing her sword. She sits back at her desk and returns to whatever work she was doing: "What is your reason for this sudden visit?"

Reinhard probably should not have burst into her office, in hindsight; that could have ended badly. For her, that is. He trusts her less and less by the second. She dropped the subject way too quickly.

"I'm terribly sorry." he bows, "It's an urgent question, I'm afraid. I'm here to settle an important matter with your... ah, *guest*, Natsuki Subaru."

He can tell that that caused her heart to skip a beat, but she's a remarkably good actress.

"He isn't staying here." she says, confident as ever, and strangely, it's not a lie, "Why did you come here if you wanted to see him?"

"Lady Crusch." he says, seriously, "Like I said, this is important. I can not afford to be lied to right now."

She isn't shaken in the slightest. Reinhard has to resort to a deeper truth to the matter, and one she will certainly be more sensitive to.

He leans in to whisper: "It's about Felix."

Three words was all it took. She looks up from her papers and, finally, he can see a spark of something in her eyes.

"What about Felix?" she asks, coolly.

It worked. Perfect. Reinhard doesn't even have to lie to her. He isn't certain lying would work with her, even with all his power, and now is not a good time to test the limits of their respective blessings. This is important.

"He's tending to Natsuki Subaru's wounds, yes?" he asks. She doesn't answer. Reinhard continues: "If he was, I would have to warn you that I suspect Subaru to be involved with the Witch Cult."

Her grip on the pen tightens as she fails to sense any lies. She's starting to consider her options, but she isn't fully convinced yet.

"On what grounds?" she asks him. Her appearance is remarkably calm compared to the buzzing in her head.

"A cultist I interrogated mentioned him, and my investigations of him are unfortunately making my suspicions worse." he says. Technically, it's the truth. His suspicions are no lie, so there are no lies for her to detect.

Lady Crusch finally puts her pen down.

"And you think he might be a danger to Felix." she concludes, "As well as everyone here. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And I am to believe this on the word of a cultist?"

Oh no. He didn't consider that. He needs a quick recovery.

"I didn't sense a lie in his words." he adds, hurriedly, "I'm not going to take any chances. Not with one of my friends. I'm certain that you, just as much as I, don't want any harm to come to Felix, and the Witch Cult isn't known for mercy."

He pushes down the memories that start to swell in his brain, and at the same time hopes with all his heart that she can see them too. See the death, the desolation and tortures of the Witch Cult, just like he saw them, see them and *know* them, down to her bones.

She is still, but her mind runs fast.

Through stiff lips, she says: "I'll talk to him myself. I need to gather his plans before he can act upon them."

"No." smiles Reinhard, "I think it would be more effective if I talked to him. That is why I'm here, in fact."

*Or else I will just follow you there*, he thinks, and she knows it.

Lady Crusch's paling complexion finally starts to regain some colour. She stacks her papers with firm hands.

"Only subdue him if absolutely necessary." is her only condition. He needs to hurry up, because she's going to follow him. It's fine if she doesn't trust him. He doesn't trust her either.

Subaru was just leaving, as it turns out. Or, rather, has already left, but it doesn't matter, because Reinhard knows where he is now.

He's close. *They* are close; that is, Subaru and Felix, as well as their respective *chaperones*, which means Reinhard has to be quick.

Reinhard doesn't knock down the door. He simply opens it. Unfortunately, it fell off its hinges in the process, but it's nothing a little work won't fix. Besides, the cabin is unlikely to be used again if people think a Sin Archbishop was staying in it.

The first person he sees is neither Subaru, nor Felix.

It's the oni girl.

For a moment, Reinhard wonders if it's too late to save her, too, until she looks up and her eyes flare with hatred. It's too late for her. Reinhard does feel a little guilty when he smacks the side of her head, just hard enough to make her collapse into a heap on the floor. He couldn't get her before her yell gave the alarm, though. The poor girl was a puppet, at that point. He can only hope Felix isn't in the same condition.

His answer arrives sooner than he would have liked. Reinhard can hear hurried whispering voices through the thin walls of the cabin.

*"Go, go, go! In there!"*

*"But—"*

*"Quickly! It's okay, I can handle this."*

Well, Reinhard really hopes he's wrong, but it almost sounds like Felix is trying to help Subaru escape.

Reinhard doesn't give him any time to. The door is pulverised with a single touch.

He finds Felix leaning very suspiciously on the lid of a laundry basket.

"Felix." he smiles.

"Reinhard." says Felix, as awkward as he always is when he's been caught in a lie and he knows it (Reinhard *missed* that awkwardness, he missed everything about the real Felix, he even missed his ragged shadow once it was dead). Still, if Felix has anything at all, it's bold-faced courage, and he has the gall to ask: "What are you doing here?"

"I think you know." smiles Reinhard. He pretends not to notice the laundry basket at all. He's here to test a theory, not to play hide-and-seek.

Felix isn't passing the test so far: "Nyope, I really don't." he grins.

*Liar.*

Reinhard takes a step closer to him: "Okay, well, I'm here to see Subaru."

"Subaru isn't here." says Felix, quickly.

"Oh, isn't he?" Reinhard puts on a small frown, "What a shame. In that case, I'm here for the oni girl."

Felix lurches forward. Almost as if someone were trying to push open the basket he's leaning on.

"Meow, why would you be here for her?" he chuckles, "She doesn't give out her address very easily, you knyow?"

"Well, it's worth a try, isn't it?" smiles Reinhard, "If she *is* involved with the Witch Cult like I've heard, I'm going to need her address."

Felix puts even more of his weight on the basket. Unfortunately for him, he's rather light compared to Subaru. His efforts fail almost immediately.

Subaru bursts out of the basket, knocking Felix off-balance and sending him stumbling directly into Reinhard's arms.

"Shut up!" Subaru barks, "You know damn well that Rem has nothing to do with this or the Witch Cult, you fu—"

He freezes in his tracks when he sees Reinhard's hands on Felix's shoulders.

*That's right, he's not yours anymore.*

Reinhard just smiles.

"Don't worry, Subaru. I got what I came for."

Subaru stares at them, stock-still and pale, as the pieces slowly fall into place.

When it hits him, he lunges forward with nothing but his bare hands, trying to get to Felix. He doesn't get very far. All Reinhard has to do is lift a hand and Subaru goes flying, crashing straight through the wooden wall of the cabin.

Felix flinches, but he can't move away: "Subaru!"

Subaru lets out a weak groan. He can't do much else. Reinhard is fairly certain his arm is broken again. If not his ribs.

Well, he'll live. The oni girl will get up any minute now, and then she can help him. Reinhard feels rather guilty for hitting her, no matter how bestial her anger might be; hopefully, this is the last time such violence will be needed.

He looks down at Felix, to find him trembling in his grip. He positively *radiates* panic, the poor thing.

Reinhard holds Felix a little tighter.

"I can still save you." he declares, "I *will* save you."

"Let go of me!"

"Don't worry."

"I'm *very* worried!" Felix cries, ineffectively trying to get out of Reinhard's grip. He still seems like himself. That's a start.

Reinhard lifts him up by the waist, crossing his arms behind Felix's back. He's feather light to him.

"Let's go." he smiles, ignoring Felix's continuous kicking and screaming for help. It's like dealing with Felt all over again.

Ah, but maybe he should assuage his worries a little; it doesn't seem fair to frighten him so much, and Felix kicking and screaming the whole way is going to draw unwanted attention.

"I'm just taking you home." says Reinhard, "Julius is there too. Nothing is going to harm you."

Felix stops kicking for a moment.

"Julius?" he repeats. Oh, it's working.

"Yes." smiles Reinhard, "It's all going to be fine. I'll save you."

Reinhard can't quite decipher the mix of emotions coming from Felix. Is that... fear? Worry? Perhaps this isn't working as well as he'd hoped, but it's going to be fine, surely.

A world needs its people, after all, and the people need their world.

Felix lowers his head.

"Stop." he says, weakly, "Stop it."

His heart's not in it, not really. Good.

"It's alright." Reinhard repeats, reassuringly. He takes the first few steps outside, with Felix still in his arms, and then a tidal wave of rage washes over him from behind. It isn't the oni girl.

It's the old man from last time.

His sword is ineffective against Reinhard. Reinhard pulls Felix closer, because Felix is not immune to swords.

"Please, sir, be careful." he tells the old man, "I'm not going to let you harm him."

"That makes two of us, then." growls the man. He's already positioned for another attack. Reinhard isn't very happy to keep throwing people into walls, if he's being honest, but if the old man doesn't give up, that is exactly what he'll be forced to do.

The man attacks. Reinhard isn't affected but, when he goes to counterattack, he finds the spot where the man was empty. He's behind him now. He's faster than he looks.

However, he still can't get a scratch on Reinhard.

The old man's attacks are relentless; still, through all of them, Reinhard continues to walk out the door. It's okay. Felix is safe, and he's not even trying to get away anymore.

The man roars in rage and frustration as one of the swords shatters against Reinhard's neck: "Let him *go!!* " he yells.

Reinhard decides it's probably time to start running. This whole affair could get someone hurt if it keeps up.

It's Felix, though, that makes the decision for him, the second Reinhard turns to face the man. Is he... worried? Was he really near the man long enough to feel worried about him? Couldn't be. Reinhard has no idea who he is.

"It's okay!" Felix cries out, still nestled in Reinhard's arms, "It's okay, Old Man Wil, I'm fine! I'm fine..." he repeats, quietly, "I'm fine. Just... stop."

In the silence that falls over his words, he pries his arms out of Reinhard's grip and locks them around Reinhard's shoulders instead.

"You're right." he says, with a trembling voice, "Let's go."

Reinhard can sense that he's afraid, but it's okay. He'll change his mind soon. As soon as he sees that Reinhard means him no harm, he'll change his mind.

"Yes." Reinhard smiles, "Let's go."

They're out the door and into the fields before the old man's desperate final slash can reach them.

All it does is tear a piece of Reinhard's cape.

## **\*Chapter 21\*: Intermission #3**

Subaru wakes up to something soft under his head. It's fabric, mostly, soft black and white fabric, and warm skin.

Someone is holding his arm, very gently, and it feels like it's being rinsed with clean, cool water.

Subaru lets out a little groan as the pain in his ribs catches up to him.

*Ow.*

"Subaru-kun?"

He'd know that voice anywhere. So that's why he felt so safe. Subaru relaxes against Rem's lap. She's fine. She's okay. She's alive. She's there. Her thighs are soft against his nape, and her hands are cool in contrast to the pulsing heat in his arm.

"Hi, Rem." he smiles through closed eyelids, "It's so nice of you to take care of me. You're the best."

He means it. But Rem doesn't receive the compliment quite as well as he would expect.

"Do you remember what happened?" she asks him. He can see her frown without even opening his eyes.

What happened? What *did* happen? He was hiding from Reinhard, and then Reinhard mentioned Rem, and then Felix...

*Felix.*

"Shit." Subaru murmurs, sitting up like a spring went off in his back: "Felix?" he calls.

No one answers him.

Rem's face tells him all he needs to know. Her words are only a confirmation: "Sir Reinhard took him away."

Subaru wants to punch a wall, but his arm isn't fully healed yet and that would be a horrible idea. He almost does it anyway, because all that frustration has to go somewhere. Of course he was there for Felix. Subaru should have known, with the whole *I'm going to save you* thing.

He doesn't know what Reinhard's idea of *saving* someone could be, if it involves kidnapping them. And he still doesn't know exactly what happened to Julius. He could be dead for all he knows. And Felt is there too, and... oh, God, what if Reinhard's idea of *saving* them is just killing them or—

"*Fuck!*" he barks, slamming his good hand into the floor.

*My fault.*

Rem frowns: "Don't hurt yourself."

"I messed up, Rem!" he cries, "I messed up! I was... all this time, I was thinking about saving myself, and saving you, and saving Emilia, and everyone else just... slipped into the background, and now—"

*My fault.*

"You can't expect to keep track of everyone." she shakes her head sadly, "Your hands aren't big enough to close them around the entire world. Cut yourself some slack."



You're still Rem's hero, you know? This doesn't change anything. I'm sure you did everything you could."

"But—"

*My fault.*

"Nobody blames you, Subaru-kun. Not even Sir Felix."

She's right. She's probably right. No use crying about it now. Except...

"I pushed him over to Reinhard." he whispers, "Of course he blames me. I basically gave him away."

*My fault.*

"Did you not try to save him right after?"

He... did, now that he thinks about it.

"How did you..."

"I know you." she nods, sadly, "He knows you too. At least well enough to see that you don't mean him any harm. And Sir Reinhard would have taken him anyway. My Subaru-kun is amazing, but I don't expect him to stand alone between a Sword Saint and his goal."

She's right, but if Felix is still alive and, by any chance, wants to slap Subaru, Subaru will not blame him in the slightest. Now, though, all he can do is try to find a solution. She's right.

Subaru drags himself to his feet.

A thought strikes him: "Wilhelm?"

Rem's face tenses a bit. "He's outside." she says, "He isn't doing very well. I couldn't console him. Maybe he'll be more willing to listen to you."

*My fault— no.*

Subaru straightens out. He gives Rem a thumbs up and a big smile, because she deserves it: "Ok! I'll go talk to him. You can rest now, Rem. I'm going to need your help later, when we save everyone."

She smiles at him, her eyes full of admiration. It's enough for him. That alone can keep him going for now.

*My f—*

*No.*

Wilhelm is standing outside, in a position that suggests he hasn't moved in quite some time. He still holds twin swords in his hands, but one of them is broken beyond repair.

"I'm glad to see you awake." he tells Subaru, without even turning around to face him. His voice sounds strained, but sincere.

"You aren't exactly *seeing* me, per se." Subaru quips. His attempt at dissolving the tension in Wilhelm's shoulders fails miserably. In fact, he looks *more* tense, if that was even possible.

Wilhelm forces himself to turn around. He can't hide the deep shame in his eyes, no matter how much he tries to avoid Subaru's gaze.

"I take it Miss Rem told you what happened?"

Subaru deflates, because humour isn't going to help now.

"She did." he admits, "How uh... how are you feeling?"

"I wasn't harmed."

Not technically a lie, but...

"That's not what I asked." Subaru frowns, "Rem didn't know the details. What happened, exactly?"

Wilhelm looks away again.

"I was right there." is all he says. It's all he needs to say. In four words, he painted a perfect picture.

Subaru isn't quite sure how to recover from that. But trying is what he does best.

"Yeah, but it's *Reinhard* ." he scowls, "No one blames you. Even *you* couldn't put a scratch on the guy."

"I've beaten a Sword Saint before, and she *wasn't* hurting someone I don't want to be hurt." says Wilhelm, flatly, "Why would this one be any different?"

Subaru doesn't have an answer to that, because he doesn't know what he's talking about or what the woman he mentioned was like. Maybe it's *because* she wasn't hurting anyone that he was able to beat her.

"Panic does weird things?" he tries. It falls flat.

"Look," Subaru sighs, "We can't do anything about what already happened. The best we can do is try to fix it. I'm not gonna leave everyone in Reinhard's clutches forever. It's all going to be fine, okay? I will save them." he promises, "I'll go alone if I have to, but something tells me I won't have to."

Wilhelm meets his eyes for the first time.

"You won't." he confirms.

## **\*Chapter 22\*: The Dollhouse**

Reinhard doesn't let go of Felix when they reach the door. He doesn't want to. Besides, Felix looks tired. Not merely *tired*, actually, more like he's suffering from the deepest kind of exhaustion there is. He has long since stopped fighting back, but his fear has never really left. Reinhard can't figure it out.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asks, all of a sudden, and Felix winces.

"No." he lies.

Reinhard treats it as a yes, because it is: "Why?"

Felix doesn't answer. He just looks up at the mansion and grits his teeth. What is he worried about?

What he's worried about becomes apparent pretty quickly, as Felix scans the four gloomy-looking people in the foyer and asks: "Where's Julius?"

"He's sleeping." smiles Reinhard.

There's a spike of something that feels like fear. "It's too early for that." says Felix firmly.

"He's just sleeping." Reinhard repeats, "We can go see him, if you're worried. Just don't make too much noise. He's asleep."

Before they can do that, though, Felt stands up from the armchair she has sunk into. Everyone else tries to stop her, but they don't make it in time, not before she proclaims: "Yeah, 'cause you drugged him!"

Rom pulls her back into her chair at the speed of light, but the damage is done. The elephant in the room has been pointed out, and now no one can look away. Felix turns suspicious eyes on Reinhard: "Is that true?" he hisses, and then, without even waiting for an answer: "Why would you do that?"

He didn't even wait for an answer.

Reinhard decides to address one thing at a time. He smiles at Felt: "I take it you picked the lock. My lady's talents haven't gone to waste, I see."

Now no one can keep Felt from speaking up.

"Ya got some gall, ya bastard. I know what ya gave 'im, and it ain't the kinda tea I'd give to a friend."

"Well..." says Reinhard, "He's safer this way."

"How?" Annika bursts. Her hands are clenched tightly into her apron and her teeth are gritting in a useless attempt to keep herself from speaking up. Reinhard feels sorry for her, he really does, but at this point, Julius probably trusts the maids more than him.

Still, he bows his head to her: "I'm sorry I didn't tell you what it was. I didn't think you would be so upset."

She grits her teeth even more but, before she can gather the courage to answer, Felt does it for her: "Ya made her drug someone, of course she's upset!"

"Like I said, I'm sorry."

"Too little, too late, Reinhard." glares Felt, "And I'm sure he'll say the same when he wakes up."

" *If* he wakes up." mumbles Rom.

Felt goes pale: " *If*? "

"That thing is dangerous."

Reinhard can't help the sting of irritation in his chest. He can't help that his arms clench a little. Why are they all so hostile?

"You're all exaggerating this." he growls, "Someday you'll understand that I saved him, and all of you. I have to keep you here, because it's the only place that's safe! Nowhere else. No one else can protect you! No one else will! I care about you all too much to make the same mistakes twice; I love you all too much to let you be harmed again, and *this* is the only place I know where you can all be sa-

" Goa. "

A small explosion near his arms startles him into releasing his grip, and Felix gasps as he's finally dropped to the ground.

Reinhard turns to Rosa, her arm still raised, with sparks flying around it.

"Why would you do that?" he frowns. Why would she? She doesn't like to use her magic at all, so why would she use it on Reinhard? It's a useless endeavour to attack him at all, let alone with such a basic spell.

Rosa, as her only response, turns her eyes to Felix, and that's when Reinhard sees why she did what she did. Felix is gasping for air. His arms are bruising where Reinhard was holding him; surely, his torso must not look much better.

Reinhard takes a step back in abject horror. She has just saved Felix. From *Reinhard*.

Finally, she speaks up: "Do you call that safety, Reinhard?"

She hasn't called him by his name alone in many years. Since he was eight or nine, maybe. Suddenly, he feels small.

"I... It's better this way." he stutters, "You would all be dead by now. Felix would not be himself anymore. You... you and Annika would have suffocated under the ruins of this house. You're safer here!"

Felix drags himself to his feet. The bruises are fading fast.

"You're wrong." he tells him, "Plain and simple. Nothing was going to happen. And what is this thing with you and Subaru—"

Reinhard's neck snaps back so fast it nearly pops: "He was going to use you, and you were going to live like a puppet until he was done with you! And I see he's already started."

"He hasn't done anything to me!"

Reinhard grits his teeth. Even after that, Felix still defends Subaru. Why? And why does everyone look at him like he's delusional?

No. Reinhard has literally seen the future. Reinhard knows best here. They can't tell him otherwise.

Reinhard knows best.

"I promised I would save you." he tells Felix, closing the distance between them with a single step, "The promise stands. Follow me."

Reinhard's ears are ringing. They're ringing so loud that he can barely hear the screams. He doesn't know what they're trying to tell him. All he knows is that, by the time he can hear again, he's alone. Alone, out in a hallway, with sounds coming from all over the house and no one beside him to explain them. Of course, he *could* listen more closely and figure it out himself, but he doesn't. What does he do, instead?

Sit down, right where he is, and let his ears keep ringing.

It's easier that way.

It's easier to pretend he can't hear Felix beginning to panic, or Felt jamming pins into the lock of her bedroom, or Annika trying to pry the window open, or Rom slamming himself against the metal door of the basement, or Rosa throwing spell after spell at the other door. Or complete silence from Julius. Incidentally, that is where he's sitting: right in front of the room where he's locked Julius. It's not a coincidence. He needs silence. And a little reassurance.

Some part of him whispers that Julius wouldn't say what he wants to hear if he was awake. The other part says that, in that case, all he has to do is stay asleep.

Two hours pass him by.

Three.

Four.

The noises gradually quiet down. Quiet. Quiet. Quiet.

*A scream.*

Reinhard nearly bangs his head against the wall. Who's screaming? Who? A girl. Not Felt, that's not what her screams sound like. Why does he know that? It doesn't matter. It's not Felt, so it's Annika.

Reinhard has already reached the room and slammed the door open before the scream is even over.

The first thing he sees are Annika's eyes. They flare with anger, then confusion, then anger again, then pain, and she screams in his face: "*Make it stop!*"

She's pushing and pulling at her hair; the long braid slung over her shoulder is slowly, but surely, coming undone, as she pulls out strand after strand. The tiny marks left by her nails mark both of her cheeks and climb all over her arms.

"*Make it stop!*" she yells again, violently striking herself in the temple.

"Please calm down..." Reinhard murmurs, as reassuringly as he can, holding her wrists to stop her.

"It's breaking!!"

"What is breaking, Annika?"

"My head is breaking!" she sobs. She's in so much pain. Reinhard could feel it even if he didn't have the blessing of empathy: it's so vivid, and it's truly like she says it is.

Like her head is breaking.

He pulls her to his chest, as if that could hold her splitting skull together, but it doesn't help. She keeps on sobbing, and screaming, and trying to kick him away so she can get at her head again, with long chestnut hairs still stuck between her fingers from when she pulled them out and a broken nail that she hasn't even noticed.

It takes her almost an hour to stop being in pain, but when it happens, it happens so suddenly that it knocks her down to the ground. She collapses like a marionette with its strings cut.

Reinhard stares down at her, unsure of what to do for a moment.

When he gently moves her messy hair away from her face, though, he almost loses his balance. Her eyes are terrifyingly familiar.

They look just like Felix's eyes used to.

## **\*Chapter 23\*: Reunion**

Reinhard tries to think. He fails.

It's hard to see Annika's face when all his mind can show him is the last time he saw Felix in his previous life, silent and huddled in on himself and utterly *broken*. He never wants to see that again.

Reinhard gently gathers the maid in his arms. She's so small, it's hard to even feel her weight, and yet he can still feel the weight of guilt in his stomach. He did not do this, of course. Still, he failed to prevent it, which is enough of a crime by itself. But guilt will not help her, so he has to think of something else. Someone else.

Felt.

She's not going to abandon her new friend, is she? Even if she tried, Annika is not enough of an obstacle to stop him from going after Felt.

Reinhard knows Rosa would probably be the better choice in terms of looking after a young girl. Rosa has always taken care of Annika when her mother could not. But Rosa would also incinerate Reinhard if given the chance, and she has enough power in her to put up a good fight, at least. Burn down the house, probably.

If not with her fire, she is more than capable of incinerating him with her eyes.

So Reinhard dodges a spinning kick on his way into Felt's room, leaves Annika with her, promises to fix the issue, and leaves them alone again.

He can't deny it. Felt was so accusatory it hurt.

It didn't hurt enough to stop him, though.

Reinhard promised that he would *fix it*, and it was a bold promise, because he has no idea how. Even in the other reality, he was never quite sure of the mechanics of the Whale's spell. No one was. No one is. He can't let everyone know that, though; he can't just tell Felt that he doesn't know how to fix it.

Maybe it will fix itself. In a way, that was what happened with Felix, wasn't it? From what he's managed to piece together between his ravings in the old world, and the suspicious presence of a new person in the new world. Yes, Felix healed by himself. The only reason it broke him was that someone manipulated him, but Annika doesn't have to worry about that. She's in a safe place, after all.

They all are.

Sometime after that, Reinhard decides he should probably visit Felix too. He's worried about his friend, in all honesty, who sounded so exhausted and upset. He vaguely remembers Felix telling him that he doesn't do well with being trapped, either. It's unfortunate that he has to stay trapped for a while longer, then. If it weren't for his own safety, Reinhard wouldn't dream of locking him up like that; only in his nightmares, perhaps.

He knocks gently on the door and any movement from inside stills right away.

"Felix?" he calls through the door, "I'm coming in."

Feather-light footsteps jump away from the door before he's even done speaking. Like a startled cat.

Reinhard delicately closes the door behind himself after walking in. He's used to it. He looks over at Felix, who stands in the corner with his shoulders to the wall and the kind of face a cornered animal makes.

It's a sad sight, to be sure.

Reinhard sighs.

"I'm sorry I have to do this," he says, sincerely, "I really am."

He almost flinches at the sound of Felix's bitter laugh. It comes out of nowhere. It scares him.

"So what if you are?" Felix shakes his head, "Even if you were, and I doubt it, it doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because guess what?" Felix gestures to the room at large: "Sorry or not, I'm still stuck here. So keep your niceties to yourself, for once, and if you're here just to apologise, you can leave."

Reinhard has to remind himself to be firm with him. No matter how much his friend's accusatory eyes make him want to turn and leave. He shakes his head to break away from that gaze, if only for a moment: "I'm not only here for that. I wanted to check how you're doing in h—"

"How do you *think* I'm doing?" Felix explodes. It's almost a sob, but it's unmistakably angry, accusatory, frustrated, scared. Anything but sad.

It's uncomfortable. Reinhard puts his hands forward in an unintentional parody of a placating gesture: "Like I said, I'm sorry, but—"

"Like I said, if that's all you're here for, you can get the hell out!"

Reinhard almost does exactly that. He's cracking. He knows that, if he doesn't calm Felix down right away, he won't be able to hold his ground the next time he's told to leave.

It's a cheap shot and he knows it. He takes it anyway, because it's the only thing that will get Felix to talk to him right now, or ever, perhaps.

"I thought you might want to talk to Julius," he says, quietly, and he can almost *feel* the shift in his attitude. It's not quite enough but it's a good start for sure.

Felix shakes his head, not quite as aggressive as before: "What, is naptime over, then?"

It's lost just enough bite that Reinhard feels confident bringing it up.

"You can bring him out of his sleep, can't you?" he smiles, "I am in no way opposed to letting you speak with him, if it will put your mind at ease."

He's both surprised and mildly scared when Felix bursts into a bitter laugh.

"Right!" he exclaims, clapping his hands together like he wants to break them, "Right, because it doesn't matter, does it? Neither of us can leave, so why does it matter if we know we're trapped? All the better for you, is it?"

Reinhard frowns: "I would thank you not to refer to this as *being trapped*."

"Then what, pray tell, is this?"

"It's..."



He actually feels quite upset. It's an unfamiliar feeling, and he doesn't like it. He knows the answer, of course he does, but he also knows that Felix will refuse to believe him no matter what. He can be so stubborn sometimes. It really makes him wonder how anyone could have managed to break him.

"It's for your safety." he decides, "As I've said before. I really *do* want the best for you. I'm sorry that you don't believe me in that regard."

"I don't believe you, because you're *lying*." hisses Felix, spitting every word like it's venom from a frightened snake, spelling out the word *lying* like it has personally offended him. "You're *lying*, and not just to me; you lied to me, you lied to everyone in this house and outside, and you are blatantly lying to yourself, and you are too stubborn to admit that. That's what's happening."

Reinhard voices his thoughts before he can catch himself: "How did anyone ever manage to break you?" he ponders, realising a second too late just how bad that sounds.

Felix is, predictably, rather agitated by the notion. And who could blame him? But, really, it doesn't matter that Reinhard was in no way referring to himself, because Felix is looking for something to turn against him in everything he says. He's really angry.

"No one did." says Felix, quietly and dangerously, a warning; "No one will."

Some people like to say *forgive and forget*. Felix, unfortunately for Reinhard at this exact moment, is firmly in the category of those who prefer to *resent and remember*.

Reinhard bites his lip in thought.

"I mean you no harm." he says, quietly.

The scorching aggression coming from Felix wanes, just a little.

"I *know* ." he spits, "That's what makes me so angry."

Silence falls heavy on them. Heavy like the debris of a collapsing mansion, heavy like the last movements and squirms of a dying whale. Suffocatingly heavy.

Reinhard hates it.

"So, then... Do you want to see him?" he asks, quietly, gently, barely a whisper, because Felix still intimidates him in some capacity. He's got something fierce and violent about him that goes unnoticed all too easily, and right now, he's making no effort to hide it.

He makes no effort to hide it as his eyes burn holes into Reinhard's face either: "If only to know you're not *killing* him."

Reinhard's heart stutters, and he quickly moves over to the door: "I would never."

"Oh, you don't know what you've given him, do you?" smirks Felix, every bit as bitter as he's been all day, "Whale's Tooth, Reinhard? Really? Did you even read up on it?"

"O-of course I did."

"I'm sure you know how wildly unpredictable it is, then." he sighs, moving out of the room, "But I guess keeping him in the dark is worth the risk of condemning him to the dark forever."

"It was one dose." Reinhard frowns, but his stomach sinks. Did he really...?

"Like I said, unpredictable."

"It was *one* dose."

Felix doesn't answer this time. He doesn't say a word, not as they walk, not as they open the door to Julius's quiet room, not even as he walks up to the bed and takes a seat. His face tenses just a little as he takes hold of Julius's wrist, but that's about it. He is, otherwise, worryingly expressionless, and Reinhard has to wonder if it might be out of spite; he wonders if, perhaps, Felix wants to scare him. But then, to scare him, he would need to believe him capable of conscience and guilt, and clearly, he doesn't. Inward, Reinhard chastises himself for rejecting the idea that Felix might simply be trying to contain his rising anger. That really is the most likely option, isn't it?

What is wrong with you, Reinhard?

He shakes away the thought that doesn't feel his, and pipes up from the doorway: "Is everything alright?"

He catches Felix tensing, and then visibly taking one, two, three calming breaths. Taking his time. The possibility of him doing this out of spite seems ever more likely.

"No," he answers, making Reinhard's stomach sink, "but you knew that."

"I—"

"*Nothing* is alright. What do you want me to say?"

"I just want to know if he's..."

"...in good health? No." Felix laughs, "But he'll live. Provided you never do something this stupid again."

"Are you going to... wake him up?"

"I don't think I'm quite ready to break his heart like this." Felix bares his teeth as he smiles. His canines are sharp. His breaths are coming in short, angry bursts now, like broken up laughter: "Just in case you come to your senses, I won't be the one to tell him this. No, no, no. Do it yourself. Maybe, if you have to actually face consequences, you'll see through your own bullshit."

That hardly seems fair.

"Felix—"

Felix crosses his arms spitefully: "If you promise me you'll be the one to explain this, sure, I'll wake him up. He was always good at talking people out of stupid plans, wasn't he?"

Pointed as a sewing needle. Of course.

Reinhard sighs.

He's not quite sure, actually. It is true that Julius was always very persuasive, and that lying to him was painful. It is true that what Reinhard did was cruel on multiple levels. It is also true that someone like the Archbishop of Pride would have done far worse in a heartbeat. Julius is a reasonable man. He might be able to understand that. He might even be able to convince Felix, if he does understand.

But then, Julius may take strong offence to being drugged, specifically. It is understandable, of course. Reinhard is half tempted to make good on the thought he had long ago (what feels like decades ago by now), the last time that he found his friend trapped and helpless and paralysed by hands much weaker than his own. It was so stupid of Reinhard to ignore that thought, chastise himself for having it, even; why *shouldn't* he kill them? They are a plague on the earth they walk on, much like the Archbishop. The only difference is that the Archbishop cannot be killed, not truly.

Reinhard should make good on the threat that he thought, and the threat that Felix voiced, all those years ago.

But not now. Now, he should talk to his friend. Explain himself. If anything goes wrong, well, what can Julius do?

"Alright;" he decides, "Wake him, then."

He wishes he could ignore the hatred in Felix's eyes, or the way he's nearly draped around Julius, most likely in an attempt to shield him even with his much smaller frame.

But his friend says nothing, so Reinhard doesn't, either. He simply watches and waits, as Felix gently places his hands to Julius's temples and presses down a little.

With a flash of blue, Julius gasps awake.

## **\*Chapter 24\*: Too Close**

"Felix?"

"I'm here."

For all his bravado, Felix sounds like he wants to cry. He holds Julius's pale hand between his own, gazing down at his friend with tears already forming at the corners of his eyes.

"Hello." says Julius, quietly, and Reinhard can't see his face, but he knows he's smiling: "Is something wrong, Felix?"

Felix doesn't answer. Not verbally, anyway. Inevitably, his sharp and mean façade falls, and he falls against Julius's shoulder with a sigh that sounds like a laugh and a sob all at once.

Julius stiffens for a second, only a brief moment, and then lifts his heavy arms to hold him. He doesn't even notice Reinhard. But the weird part is that it's honestly better this way; just standing and watching them hold each other, soft and safe and far away from the Archbishop's tricks. Reinhard thinks it's lovely. Yet it doesn't occur to him that he himself is not in that picture.

When they look back at him, for just a moment, Reinhard dares to hope they will smile, invite him to join them at Julius's bedside, as they have a million times before. A vain hope, obviously.

He meets Julius's eyes for a second and it almost looks like he *wants* to tell Reinhard to come closer.

No such luck.

His arms close tightly around Felix's tiny frame, and his torso curls a little as if to shield him, but he's far too weak to get up like he clearly wants to. He doesn't say anything; doesn't greet Reinhard, doesn't chastise him, just silently challenges him to get closer.

Reinhard does not like it when Julius challenges him. Not like that, anyway. If he had wanted Julius to go against him, he wouldn't have put him to sleep.

Reinhard does smile at his friend, though, *genuinely* smiles, because at least he's alive.

"Sorry to wake you so abruptly." he says, pointedly, "Felix insisted. He was adamant that you would have something to say to me."

"You drugged me."

Julius says those three simple words as plainly as it comes, but his arms are shaking: "You *drugged* me. Why? What reason could you possibly have t—"

"I think I explained that already."

"I forgot." Julius snaps, "I forgot, because you drugged me. I was not exactly coherent. And of all things, of *all* things you could have done to me—"

"Don't take it so personally," Reinhard frowns, "I felt I had no other choice. Tell me honestly: would you have stayed behind if I had asked you to?"

"No."

"Then—"

"Which should not matter to you. I am *grown*, Reinhard, not a child you need to put to bed when he's misbehaving." says Julius, sharply, "Even if I were, who in their right mind would jump directly to sedatives when talking fails?"

Reinhard's head is spinning. Even after everyone else's reactions, it's hard to withstand Julius's anger. His eyes are piercing and cold, and their message is clear: *you are not welcome here*.

But he needs only remind himself of those agonising hours spent wondering if his friend was alive, if he was being held captive, if he was being tortured, if his body was already gone to the dogs. The memory pierces his heart, and he finds it in himself to stammer: "He would've— He would have killed you, or *worse*."

"No, he would not." says Julius sternly, "He asked to meet me because he was terrified of you, and it seems his impression was correct. I do not know what brings you to torment a boy whose biggest crime was making a fool of himself, but you must—"

"He would have killed you," Reinhard repeats, more confidently, "He has the means to. If you had met him alone... Julius, please, I can't even *imagine*—"

That was a lie.

"—what he might do to you! I refuse to let any harm come to you because I was careless and fell for his deceit again!"

"*Again?*" Felix echoes, his voice rough from crying and still muffled into Julius's shoulder: "You met him *once* before the Royal Selection, and you had nothing bad to say about him. When did he become some evil mastermind?"

They're asking too many questions. They're getting too close. Not physically, of course: they remain firmly in their respective positions on the bed, clinging to each other like Reinhard is going to tear them apart once more. He... might. Of course he might, if they become too easy to listen to. Their combined efforts are a force to be reckoned with.

They couldn't get farther away from him, and yet they're too close.

Reinhard fiddles with the vial in his pocket. Is it really that bad? Compared to what else could have happened, is sleeping really so bad? Oh, he *knows* they'll never look him in the eyes again. Of course he knows. But Reinhard has sacrificed his own feelings his entire life; what's one more time? He's waiting for the other shoe to drop, and when it does, this will all pay off. This will all pay off. Maybe they will even forgive him; if they don't, at least they'll be alive, and safe.

He sensed a trace of nervousness when Felix was telling him about the drug. He never outright lied, no, but he might have exaggerated. If there's anyone at all who would know how to talk around Reinhard's Divine Protection, it would be him, so is it not plausible that he would mislead him just for a chance to speak with Julius?

It's fine. Everything is fine. For the first time in his life, Reinhard has a chance to turn back time and do the right thing. He will not waste it.

But first, he tries to explain himself once more: "You do not know what I know. I just need you both to *trust me*, just for a little. This will all make sense—"

"*When?*" Felix demands, "When will it make sense? Because so far, every time you try to explain, it makes *less* sense."

"I would thank you not to interrupt me, Felix. It will make sense when he gets tired of playing with me and tries something."

He can see their faces fall before he's even done talking. Like they had *hoped* he would change his tune.

"You are making a mistake." says Julius, sadly, as he struggles to at least sit up, "We have tried to warn you so many times. What can I do to convince you to stop?"

Reinhard is well aware that he could ask for the moon and Julius would die trying to catch it for him. That is exactly what he's afraid of.

"Nothing." he sighs, "I'm sorry, Julius. There is nothing you can offer that would help this situation. I would simply like you to lie down and rest. You're safe here."

"No."

"It will be alright, just—"

"No!"

Julius, for whatever reason, made sure to push Felix as far away from the bed as he could, but he still rejects his attempt to give him the vial. He isn't going to drink the medicine, is he? Well, lucky for Reinhard, it works a few different ways.

"Hush now." he smiles. He pours the contents of the vial onto a little towel on the nightstand.

Julius seems to sense what's coming. He flinches away, but Reinhard grabs him by the wrist.

"Stay there."

"Let me go!"

"Shh..."

Julius tries to hold his breath for as long as he can after the towel goes over his face. He even looks calm, at first, as he tries to feign unconsciousness. A good strategy, but it doesn't work when Reinhard can feel his racing pulse under his fingertips.

He can't hear anything. He vaguely registers Felix screaming at him, but as for what he's saying, Reinhard has no idea. Right now, he doesn't really care.

It's only when air starts to run out that Julius begins to panic. Instinctively, he struggles and thrashes in Reinhard's grip; to no avail, he tries everything, whether it be scratching or punching or screaming from under the towel or just trying to escape, but Reinhard doesn't move a single inch until he feels Julius's chest expand and his pulse drop. He breathed in.

"Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" he hums, as his friend's struggles slowly die down.

Julius slumps against him. He doesn't answer, not really. All he says, quietly, before sleep takes him, is: "Don't."

When the screaming fades in again, the rest of the room is still.

Reinhard hears it, in theory, but in practice, he still can't decipher a word of it. His head feels heavy and there's a strange feeling in his lungs. Like breathing in the warm mist of blood. Reinhard really hates that he knows that feeling.

He's hunched in on himself, that's all he can really tell.

Reinhard thinks of the smell of blood, and how he only stopped breathing it in when it was replaced by ashes and smoke. He thinks of that, and he closes his arms tightly around himself—

*Crunch.*

The screaming stops.

## **\*Chapter 25\*: The Angel On Your Shoulder**

Reinhard doesn't move. It's hard to move, for some reason. The only thing stopping him is a near-insignificant weight in his arms, but it's heavier than anything he's ever had to carry.

He decides not to look down. He doesn't need to. His hearing won't keep secrets from him, unfortunately, and the silence is proof enough that there is nothing to be done.

It's a slow walk back to the other bedroom, and he doesn't bother to close any doors behind him. Why would he? Corpses can't walk.

The sheet soaks up immediately when he drapes it over... *that*. As expected. Reinhard learned a long time ago that bodies are fragile, and if he's being honest, he doesn't know when he forgot it.

He expects a lonely scene. Nothing but his friend unconscious on a bed. He certainly does not expect someone to be sitting next to him.

A very familiar voice asks: "Why?"

It's a question he's answered dozens of times now. This time, nothing comes out of his mouth.

"They are our *friends*. You..." The voice wavers. He sounds like he's on the verge of breaking down into violent sobs. It would be a first in a long, long time. "W-What are you even doing? What will this accomplish? Everything... everything is ruined. And it is all our fault. Just as grandfather always said."

Reinhard can't be as harsh as he would like. He doesn't know what the other him is talking about, not entirely, but it makes his heart wither in his chest all the same.

"You know why," he says, softer than he wants to, "Don't you?"

The other Reinhard only stares at him like a child wondering why their mother won't wake up. "No." He looks so small just sitting there. "... I don't. I don't understand. How could you... how could you just do all of this? You're... no better than..." He stops himself with a hand to his mouth, as if he's trying not to be sick.

It sends a shiver up and down Reinhard's spine. The kind of shiver that rattles your ribs, one by one: "*Don't*," he warns, "There was no care in his heart for anyone but himself, you *know* that, surely."

The other Reinhard doesn't say a word. He just stares back at Reinhard while the tears brimming in his eyes don't fall.

Reinhard's stomach drops: "You know that. You've seen it, just as I have. All of it. Haven't you?"

Silence. Then: "You have been living my life for a while now, yes?" The other Reinhard is staring at Julius now. He brings up one hand to wipe away his tears. "Are you happy with it?"

The shiver returns, more violent than before. Like standing in a blizzard.

"No." Reinhard snarls, "Not *your* life. I died. I found myself here. That was all."

The other Reinhard hesitates, but he asks: "Are you... certain about that?"



"What do you... What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"This world is the one I... *belong* in... I suppose." The other Reinhard stops trying to wipe away his tears. He reaches for Julius's hand instead. "You... you have been living here now, in the place I used to be." His fingers wrap around Julius's hand gently. "And this is what's become of us."

Reinhard feels an unsettling need to justify himself all of a sudden. To *explain* himself, as if the other him didn't know exactly what he was thinking: "It's better." he stammers, "Better— better this way. You... do you *know* what I left behind when I died? Do you know I had nothing left?"

The other Reinhard hesitates again before nodding slowly. He opens and closes his mouth like he wants to say something.

Reinhard grits his teeth, irritated by his own indecision: "Speak your mind."

"You... you received everything I have." the other Reinhard whispers, "And then you lost all of it..."

"Yes." Reinhard feels cold. "It has long since become a pattern, it seems."

The other Reinhard keeps holding Julius's hand. His fingers are clumsy; Julius's hand keeps slipping from his grasp. He's almost desperate to just give Julius that one small thing. "Why?" His voice sounds as small as he looks. "Why? The city does not burn now, but is this any better than that?"

He doesn't know.

He answers anyway.

"Yes," he whispers, shutting his eyes so he doesn't have to see them. He sees them anyway.

He shakes his head: "Yes. Of *course* it's better. I can... I can go back. And... the kingdom is not burning, and everyone downstairs— everyone is still alive, and..."

That's the best explanation he can give, and it's still not good enough.

A dry sob escapes out of other Reinhard. "And so hurting everyone we've ever cared about is enough for you?"

"They'll understand. Eventually."

No, they will not. But that's fine. He's been sacrificing his own feelings for as long as he can remember.

"I have accepted that I will never be as human as I would like to be." other Reinhard says softly, "I have accepted this. But to see you living my life in my place, and ruining every good thing we have ever had, while possibly risking the creation of another enemy destroying everything again just to stop us... I... I cannot take it."

Reinhard can't remember the last time he stopped to think about when he was coming off so holier-than-thou. He grits his teeth: "And I cannot go back. I can *never* go back. Not even for you."

Other Reinhard's eyes are downcast. "None of them will ever be happy." He purses his lips. "We will never be happy. Are you satisfied with a path like this?"

"It's *better*." Reinhard insists, desperately, "You were not there when everything happened. I promise you, this is better. You... you have never had to... to wait helplessly for news, only to find corpses. You have never had to wonder if our friends, somewhere, were screaming for help, for *you*, and you could not know."

His voice is coming out stilted and shaky now: "You have never had to hear the way people scream when they're on fire. Do you know what fire does to a human body? Do you know the way poison drains all the colour out of someone?"

Other Reinhard visibly trembles where he's sitting. He tries to brush a hand through Julius's hair, but his hand goes right through it. "No." he says quietly, "But you do not know if I ever took your place, after you took mine. You have said it yourself, yes? All there is... is wasteland. There is nothing left. I do not know any of those things the same way you do, but I know that this is only the lesser of two evils."

"And it's the only option I have!" Reinhard cries. He wants to get closer, but there's blood on his hands. He can't touch Julius with blood-stained hands.

He squeezes his eyes shut: "It's the lesser evil, like you said. It was all I could do."

Other Reinhard is silent for a moment. "It is still an evil." Tears run quietly down his cheeks and fall down on Julius's closed eyelid. "You are not innocent anymore."

"I know." says Reinhard, hollow enough to hear the wind whistling in his ribs, "I know. They will hate me, but they will be safe. That is more than I could ask for. That is all I deserve, if that."

"You should have confided in them." Even other Reinhard's voice sounds empty now. "You should have told them what had happened to you. You could have had help. You could have simply kept watch on Natsuki Subaru, to ensure he never becomes the person he was in your world. You could have kept watch on our friends in many other ways. Do you think that poisoning them, locking them up, among other things keeps them safe? How long will it take for them to feel safe again, Reinhard?"

Reinhard can't keep the venom out of his voice: " *Silence*. You know nothing. The first, and only time I tried to speak of this, I had to watch Julius die *again*. Why would I risk that? Why would I ever risk that again?"

Other Reinhard returns back to sounding terribly, horribly small. "Could you not explain it in vague terms? They would have done *anything* to help you. This entire time, you have risked a self-fulfilling prophecy. How do you know that your actions won't make this world just like yours? Why did you trade their well-being for their so-called safety?"

Reinhard has the answers on his tongue, but his tongue doesn't move. He feels so incredibly drained now. Of course, he would like to explain how it usually ends when his friends try to help him, when *anyone* tries to help him, but he already knows his objections will be shot down.

He's exhausted. He finds himself longing for those moments of manic happiness when he first came to this world. He's dismayed to find that he can no longer remember what that happiness felt like.

Other Reinhard reaches out and grasps Reinhard's bloody hand in his own. "What is left for us?" he asks. It sounds hollow.

It's a very simple question with a very simple answer.

Reinhard feels a sob building in his chest. His voice cracks: "Nothing, but what else is there?"

He wonders why he can feel the hand that went right through Julius a second ago. He does not really care, though.

Other Reinhard smiles sadly. "A self-fulfilling prophecy. You are no better than him."

Reinhard wants to fall against him, but he can sense his own disgust. *Is* it his own?

"I don't want to be." he gasps, "I don't *want* to be. But I don't— I *can't* see that again."

He would not survive it. In hindsight, it may be better that way.

"Then let them go." other Reinhard says.

"No."

It's an instinctual answer, nothing more.

"Your world doesn't have to burn for it to be gone."

"It's all I have."

He hates how small he sounded there.

Other Reinhard says softly, "How many times will you crush their hearts and tear their world apart before you stop?"

Reinhard has never wanted to stop existing more than he does at this moment. Would that fix everything? Would it fix *anything*?

The cold disappointment finally shows on other Reinhard's face. "There are many, many things to do in order to fix everything. Do you not know this?"

Reinhard's eyes burn: "I will make it worse. Again."

Other Reinhard stands up, staring down at him. "The least you could do is at least *attempt* to fix what you have done."

He would if he could. He thinks.

He doesn't know anything anymore. His head is spinning and his hands are still stained with blood.

"Why bother?" sighs a chillingly familiar voice behind him, "It's true. You'll make it worse."

Reinhard freezes in his tracks. He was starting to think he would never be forced to hear his voice again.

Other Reinhard continues to stare directly at Reinhard, even at the sound of *that* person.

"Let's review, shall we?"

The Archbishop saunters in, walking through the other Reinhard as if he did not exist. The other Reinhard dissipates like a cloud of smoke, with that same, awful disappointment in his eyes.

He gets right up in Reinhard's face, smaller and yet so much more imposing than him, and smiles his terrible smile. Reinhard gulps.

"So... you ruined your whole life, and I didn't even have to do any work this time?"

He cackles, a nasty, dizzying sound: "I wish I could have seen it. You know, you're right. I went too easy on you last time."

"Shut your mouth."

"No." smiles the Archbishop, "I'm good, thank you. Just wanted to point out that, if we make a list of everything I've done, and then a list of everything *you've* done..."

Reinhard wishes he could kill him. But that's how all this started, isn't it?

"I suspect..." he says coldly, "...I may not know the half of that list."

Subaru perks up: "Do you want it?"

"No."

"Too bad."

"No."

He laughs like a headache: "Too bad. I want you to know. You want to know, too."

No, he doesn't. Yes, he does. His head hurts so much.

"I don't want to know." he insists, "I don't want to see you ever again. I don't want you near—"

He intercepts the Bishop when he tries to walk past him. There's no resistance.

His head hurts. His head hurts so much.

Subaru shifts from side to side, like a child trying to get a peek over his shoulder: "Why not? Can't be worse than you. At least I know I'm horrible."

"Leave."

"You first." the boy shoots back, glancing over his shoulder again, "Let me have a look at your work, will you? Oooh, that's gonna *hurt* later."

Reinhard searches for his old passion, but his heart feels hollow: "Corpses don't feel pain."

"I agree. That's not a corpse, though."

His blood runs cold. Mostly because Subaru is right. Now that his ears have stopped ringing, Reinhard can hear a thready pulse that does not belong to either of them.

He forgets the Bishop entirely.

Unfortunately, the inverse does not apply, and that rough, oddly frail giggle keeps ringing in his ears along with that quiet little heartbeat: "Congratulations! You're officially worse than me! Oh, this? This is gonna hurt like hell when he wakes up. You get to see it this time!"

"He's *fine*." Reinhard snarls, curled around his friend like a dog defending its sleeping owner, "It was only—"

"—two whole doses, yes. In the span of hours. You should've read up on it more."

He really should have. Why didn't he?

No, all is not lost yet, no matter how much it feels like it.

Reinhard winces when he feels ashy lips brushing against his ear, and a sigh that smells of smoke.

"I should have done more." the Archbishop whispers again, "I tried, you know? But even with hundreds of timelines' worth of brainwashing, even after he killed himself over and over to escape me, I could never convince Felix to do anything worse. What's that say about *you*?"

What he already knows. That's what.

His dead lips, black like charcoal, move down to his jaw: "I wish I could have killed them all in front of you. It was such a complicated project, though; I ended up scrapping it. Aren't you lucky?"

"Shut up."

"I wish you could have seen it, you know? Maybe *then* you'd get to whine to Other Reinhard about all the horrible things you've seen." His tone is mocking: "*Oh, woe is me*, he says, when he was the lucky one every time. Felix had to *see it*, you know? Think about that."

He doesn't want to. He *really* doesn't.

His head is splitting.

He can't bring himself to move away when two cold, skeletal arms wrap around his shoulders from behind: "Your house, too. The lady downstairs, God, I can never remember her name, but she put up a fight. Burned me a little, even. I had to promise to leave the little one alone to get her to stop." chuckles the Archbishop, "It's too bad I didn't mean it. Although I guess it was a mercy in hindsight. The kid's a screamer. Oh, but you knew that part."

"Shut up." Reinhard pleads again. He shuts his eyes, but that only provides a blank canvas, a perfect base to paint every horrible image that enters his head. But opening his eyes and seeing Julius grow paler by the second isn't any better.

Subaru continues spinning his tales of death: "And it's a good thing you didn't meet Felt and Rom last time. No one bothered to evacuate the prisons when the fire started, you know?"

"That's enough!"

Reinhard tries to wave a hand through the Bishop, hoping to dissolve him like his other self, but no matter how his image twists and distorts itself, Subaru never stops laughing.

"Oh!" he adds, gleefully, "And Julius, *oof*. He got lucky, you know? That he was already dying. Just hearing him talk made me want to cut him open and see how long I could go on. Really wished the poison could hold off a little longer, to give you time to show up."

Covering his ears does nothing for Reinhard: the voice seeps through loud and clear all the same, twisting in his head, crushing his brain with all the methodical, painful calm of a thumbscrew.

"You're *lying*." he forces himself to say, pushing painful air through his teeth, "About everything. You are lying."

The Bishop stops laughing. Instead, he just tilts his head a little: "Am I?"

"I—"

"You can't know that. You didn't pay much attention to that medicine book, did you? For all you know, the side effects could include your skin melting off."

"They do *not*."

"But you don't know that."

Reinhard is starting to tire of him. He wishes this phantom were like the previous one, fragile and wispy and ready to vanish at the first sign of trouble. He shakes his head to shake off the headache, but it feels like beating a nest of wasps.

"You don't know that." insists the Archbishop, "Won't know until he wakes up, actually. It's hard to show symptoms when you're asleep."

Reinhard looks at him with nothing but pure exhaustion: "I'm not going to wake him."

"Why not? Better from this than from the pain, right? A lesser evil, if you will."

"Leave."

The head-splitting giggle comes back again: "Okay, but I'm just saying. Wake him up, and take a good look."

The edges of his figure start to fade into the background. He smiles like it hurts: "You deserve to see what happens, right?"

Reinhard swats him away like a fly, and the mist still giggles as it dissolves.

## **\*Chapter 26\*: Last Confession**

Reinhard has always found the idea of the *sleep of the dead* macabre and slightly unrealistic. No living person can come close to a corpse, and corpses do not look like they're sleeping. Ever. Even posed and well-dressed and embalmed, even with all the marks of their gruesome deaths covered up, they do not look like they're sleeping; they look *dead*.

All this to say, he has never before seen a living being look so much like a corpse.

Slowly, he reaches out to touch Julius's hand.

And then he sends a small little jolt—just enough to wake up Julius. Even after everything Reinhard's done, he's still causing Julius and the others more pain...

Julius startles awake for the second time today, although this one can hardly be considered a start. There's a thin sheen of sweat all over his translucent skin, and his eyes are glassier than before.

"Julius." Reinhard says. He sounds so dull and exhausted that you can barely hear it.

There is a moment, just like every time he's woken up, where Julius doesn't know anything. He blinks a few times, rubbing at the corner of his eye: "I'm.... sorry, did I...?" he asks, raspy and quiet, "I feel quite under the weather today, I'm afraid."

Reinhard hesitates. His voice trembles, but he says: "It's... it is alright, Julius... you were only sleeping for a bit. I only wanted to keep watch on you and make sure you... stayed safe."

There's a tenderness in Julius's eyes. The same as always, the same he always shows when someone shows concern for him. He has no idea of what happened, and it's hard to take that away from him.

"I appreciate it." he rasps out, "I feel..."

He stops there. His face loses what little colour it had.

"J-Julius?" Reinhard asks. He searches Julius's face desperately; there must be some blood somewhere on him, and Reinhard doesn't want to see it. He really doesn't want to see it. The physical proof of what he's done—but Reinhard has to know.

Julius shakes his head delicately: "It's nothing. A bit of nausea, that is all."

He isn't lying.

"B-But..." Reinhard stammers. He doesn't understand. How could Julius not be lying? There's blood somewhere on him. On his hands, probably. Definitely. It has to be there. Soon, Julius will look down and see the red dripping all over his fingers and to the floor, just as Reinhard sees when he looks at his own hands. How could it be so unnoticeable?

Julius's stomach seems to turn, and once again he covers his mouth for a moment, but he has no reaction whatsoever to Reinhard's appearance. He seems concerned, in fact: "Is something wrong?"

Reinhard doesn't understand. Reinhard doesn't understand, how can Julius just ask that without even knowing? "Don't... don't you see?" he asks shakily.

Julius searches the room with his eyes, seemingly alarmed, but finds nothing of interest. Not even as he scours Reinhard's coat in search of whatever crease or stain might be left on it. Force of habit.

"Do you... do you see it?" Reinhard tries again, fearfully.

"What am I meant to be seeing? Are you alright?"

He must be growing concerned now.

Reinhard can't look. He can't look at Julius right now. "The blood." he stammers out, "Don't you see it?"

He can see the alarm in Julius's eyes, but the obvious question never comes. Instead, Julius grows pale and begins to tilt sideways, gripping the side of the bed for support. His skin shines with sweat, but it's the least lively it's ever been.

"Julius?" Reinhard blurts out. He feels so small.

Julius opens his mouth, but not to speak. He falls to the side and spills the meagre contents of his stomach onto the floor. Some of it is a dark and sickly red.

Instinctively, Reinhard reaches for Julius with a shaky hand. "J-Julius... what's..."

The poison. The *poison*.

His body is trying to get rid of it. Trying and failing, because vomit is not supposed to have chunks of red in it.

Reinhard can't see Julius's face from where he lies on his side, but he hears his wheezing voice cry out the second he gets close: " *Don't*. "

It's the same thing he said before, and it's somehow worse.

Despite everything, Reinhard still flinches violently at that. "Julius, I..."

" *Don't* ... touch me."

There is no room for misunderstanding, not even in the cracks of his voice as he fights back another wave of nausea. He is angry, yes, but there is a better word for it.

Betrayal.

"I-I didn't... I did not mean to choose..." *This poison*.

That's a lie, though. Too many people warned him to claim plausible deniability now.

Julius takes a moment to recover whatever strength he still has. He's losing more colour than Reinhard ever thought possible.

The first question that comes out of his mouth is exactly what someone who knows him well would expect: "Where is Felix? He was here. Where is he?"

For a moment, Reinhard can't speak. So he doesn't.

Julius does not take it well: "Reinhard, *where* is he?"

With Reinhard's precedent, his suspicions should in no way come as a surprise. It's just awful that they're *correct*.

"Felix... he's..." Reinhard's voice is trembling again. "He's..." He can't say it.

Julius forces himself to sit up again just to look Reinhard in the eyes. The corner of his mouth drips with bile and blood, and judging from the spasms under his shirt, there's more on the way, and yet he still maintains that piercing glare: " *Reinhard!* "

It's not a question. It's an order.

Reinhard flinches. He bursts out: "He's— he's in the other room!"



Having obtained his answer, it's like his strings were cut, and Julius collapses to his side again. No more than a trickle this time. He hasn't eaten, after all. Only this time, most of it is red.

A dry sob escapes Reinhard. It's the exact same horrible sound that other Reinhard made. "I'm sorry, Julius, I'm so sorry!" he cries out.

"Spare me." says Julius, cold enough to bring down the temperature.

Reinhard recoils. "I..."

"I don't want to hear it."

It's not quite as final as Julius intended, perhaps, but it's every bit as terrifying.

"But I..." Reinhard stammers. His heart feels like it's leaping out of his throat. "I shouldn't... I shouldn't have done any of this, I shouldn't..." He really is making everything worse. Just as he thought.

Julius looks ready to burst, but whatever he was going to say is interrupted by another wave of bile. Or blood. It's mostly blood now. He hangs lifelessly off the bed, seemingly unable to pull himself back up.

It comes as instinct, again, for Reinhard to try and lean closer and pull Julius up. "Julius..." he stammers.

Julius doesn't stop him right away this time, albeit only because the constant spasming of his stomach is making it difficult to speak, but as soon as he's upright again, he pulls away almost violently.

"Don't touch me." he repeats, between his teeth, and there's a vulnerability there that no one has seen in a long time.

Reinhard lets go of Julius like it burns.

It *does* burn, actually. His temperature has risen to dangerous levels after the cold stupor of his sleep.

"I can... I should get something to cool you off." Reinhard blurts out.

"It is not going to help." Julius murmurs, raspy and weak. There's a sharpness to his voice that wasn't there before: "You poisoned me."

He says it without his usual sweet coating of politeness. He is neither kind nor delicate, the biggest, most damning sign that his anger is real and stronger than ever.

Reinhard's heart pounds. "I know." he says. It's all he can say. It's all he can do.

Julius says nothing. He closes his eyes for a moment, seemingly trying to bring his breathing back to a normal pace. Everything seems to be a gargantuan task for him at the moment.

That raw sort of anger coming from Julius is so *rare* that it feels like a gargantuan task for Reinhard to even *talk*. "I shouldn't have poisoned you." he chokes out, "I shouldn't have done all of these things to hurt you."

Julius's eyes immediately zero in on the tense lines all across Reinhard's face. He tears his eyes away a second later, though.

"No, you should not have." he mutters, plainly, "I would have thought that obvious."

Reinhard's voice cracks. "I know. I know it is, but... I-I figured that I should... at least say that much."

"After all these years, I thought you would know that words only take you so far." says Julius. It's not quite scolding, it's not warm enough for that.

Reinhard glances away. "I..." He couldn't even say *I know* to that. "I'm sorry."

Julius glares at him through the haze in his eyes: "Are you?"

His answer comes desperately: "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Yes. You're sorry that you chose the wrong poison."

*And everything else?* he seems to ask.

"I'm sorry that I poisoned you." Reinhard says, shaking. And then the rest of it bursts out in a rush. "I'm sorry that I— I hurt you, and Felix, and so many people. I hurt everyone and told myself that it was for a *good reason*. Nothing... nothing justifies that."

Julius sounds like he's forcing himself to sound harsh, but it's still terribly convincing: "How many people are in this house right now?"

"Seven." Reinhard says. Honestly, for once. "You and I, then Felix, Annika, Rosa, Rom, and Felt."

"And are they alright?"

Reinhard only hesitates for a moment, but he still wavers. "N-No. No."

Julius frowns, and it looks sad for a moment before he paints it over with cold anger again: "You can start with that, then."

Reinhard sucks in a breath. "Y-Yes." He doesn't say anything about Felix's corpse in the other room.

Julius sits in waiting. He doesn't look like he can do much more than that: his skin is the same colour as the sheets and, though he has stopped heaving, he seems to be unconsciously nursing his stomach. For someone so good at hiding his pain, that is a terrifying sign.

"I'll... I'll have to attend to them." Reinhard says, almost distantly. The guilt is consuming him whole like the flames he watched burn down the kingdom. "I shouldn't... I-I ruined everything."

"You've mentioned." Julius murmurs, a clear invitation to elaborate on that.

"I... I wanted to protect all of you." Reinhard confesses. He shakes his head. It doesn't help the headache hammering at his skull, but... "I wanted to keep you safe. But I sacrificed your well-being for... 'safety.'"

The temperature seems to go down a little when Julius glances back at him.

"You say that as if I knew what you speak of." he sighs, and his voice is far too weak, "I have been asleep for days. I know *nothing*. It's starting to unsettle me how you refuse to say anything about it."

Reinhard swallows. "I-I'm sorry, I'd forgotten how much you didn't know." He forces himself to look at Julius. He should, at the very least, do that after everything he's done — he should see the proof of what he's done. "It's... so much has happened, after I poisoned you and you went to sleep. I can... explain it quickly for you."

Julius keeps his tone flat and somewhat pointed: "You will have to, I'm afraid."

Right. How much time does he have?

Reinhard considers calling a healer, but when the pieces of his stomach are strewn about the floor, he isn't sure they could do much.

But to simply leave him to die would be...

...well, nothing new, actually.

Reinhard fights the urge to reach for him again. *Don't touch me* is as clear as it gets.

"Felt, Rom and the maids were the first to discover I had poisoned you," he starts, gingerly, "They found you sleeping while I was away, and they, understandably, found your sleep most unnatural. I was..."

He hesitates. He winces remembering the *crack* of Subaru's arm against the wall, and the way the old man screamed at him.

"I had obtained the location of the building Subaru was being treated in, and I..."

He is not proud.

"...stole Felix away from his camp and took him here so I could guard him more closely."

Julius breathes in sharply, as expected: "What else?" he asks, uselessly trying to dab the sweat away from his forehead with an arm that looks more like a mannequin's. He's growing weaker and weaker, and even something as small as lifting his arm is taking him too long. There's not much time left.

"I... injured Subaru in the process." He's not sure he regrets that one, but... "As well as the oni girl accompanying him, although I hear they both recovered."

"Continue."

Reinhard thinks, rather darkly, that a last confession is supposed to work the other way around. But then, he's almost certain Julius has little, if anything, to confess. So he gulps down the shame and gets to the tough part: "When I returned, I found everyone else had found out what I'd done to you. I... locked them all in separate rooms, initially, but then—"

"Oh."

"Yes. I know." he nods, almost frantic to confess everything before the end and at the same time wishing it would come a little sooner, "The first issue came when... when Annika started screaming. She— lost someone important to the Whale, and it—"

Reinhard cuts himself off, in part because he's lost for words, in part because he isn't entirely sure Julius is hearing him anymore. He looks so ill. He's alive, yes, but is he aware?

He decides to go on anyway: "I'm not— I cannot be sure she will recover. I have left her with Felt."

"You always call her that." Julius comments, too quiet.

"Who?"

"Your lady. When did you start calling her by her name?"

He can't remember.

"I do not know that." he admits, "It hardly matters now. She will not speak to me."

"And you will no longer speak to *her*."

It's harsh. It's tough to hear. He's right, though.

Reinhard's voice wavers, because he knows exactly what to say: "No. I will not. I have completely disgraced myself as her knight. I should not—"

"That is not what I meant."

It isn't?

Julius struggles to move his head in a decently comfortable position: "That is not what I meant," he repeats, "I meant that if she does not want you there, you should not *be* there. I felt you needed to hear this."

It's strangely pointed, and it has every right to be, because isn't that exactly what he's been doing lately? Staying around no matter how many times he's told to leave? How many times was it even remotely justified, and how many times was it just another cruelty? No, Julius is completely right.

Which begs the question: "Do you want me to leave?"

He's afraid of the answer, because Julius does not soften in the slightest. But Julius shakes his head: "No, stay and talk." he commands, in no uncertain terms, "You need to hear yourself talk."

"Alright."

Reinhard looks away and back again, and every time he takes his eyes off of Julius, he seems to grow a little paler, a little sicker, a little worse. He's trembling now, burning up; it seems the fire has followed Reinhard after all, and exploded just under his friend's skin. Reinhard feels his hands begin to shake as well.

"Please," he begs, "may I touch you now? You are not well."

He doesn't notice the tears welling up in his eyes, but Julius does. Of course.

Julius softens, just a little: "If I fall, you may."

Alright, then. It seems he still wants the rest of the story. Reinhard considers telling him about Felix, but he does not want him to die in anguish. Any more than this, that is.

It seems he doesn't need to, though. Out of nowhere, Julius blurts out: "Felix is dead, isn't he?"

Reinhard flinches: "How—"

"You never were as subtle as you'd like." says Julius, "And you have not called him back into the room, despite my condition."

Of course he figured it out. Julius can be incredibly smart even when he's dying. Reinhard envies it terribly, sometimes. The tears can no longer stay in his eyes. They overflow, streaking down his cheeks, cutting a line through the ash he still feels on his skin.

"I did not..." he stammers, "I did not mean to hurt him— I did not realise he was in my arms and—"

He can't go on. At this point, he's not even sure whether the pallor on Julius's face is from the poison or from the news he just received, or from the mental image he has no doubt already put together. He doesn't say anything, but Reinhard knows he can see it too.

There is nothing else to say. Reinhard has confessed to everything he's done in *this* life, and he isn't willing to risk saying more. It would not make any sense to Julius unless he explained it, and... no, he isn't going to do *that* again.

Julius, on his part, has finally stopped trembling. That is a bad sign. His body is giving up on him altogether. But still, he looks Reinhard in the eyes and leaves his final request: "Fix this."

"But—"

"Fix this, or no one... *no one* will ever look you in the eyes again."

There's no room for misunderstanding in his words.

That's the last thing he says. His hand clenches all of a sudden, and before either of them can do anything, he's seizing violently, trembling and making a horrible sound in the back of his throat.

Reinhard keeps his word. He does not touch him until he falls sideways once again, but once he has him immobilised in his arms, he can't bring himself to let go. Not even after he stops seizing.

Not even when he goes cold.

## **\*Chapter 27\*: Finale: The One Alone**

By the time Reinhard finally talks himself into falling on his sword, it's nighttime.

It hurts, of course it does, but he almost doesn't feel it. Not in the last few moments, anyway, when he sees Felix stumbling into the room with an arm wrapped around his stomach.

He's too happy to feel the pain then.

He wakes in silence.

With an icy feeling in his stomach, he puts the pieces together. He's sitting outside Julius's room, and everyone is locked away, and it's too late to fix *that*.

How far back has he gone? His head still aches.

He listens closely. All around the house, people are trying to escape, and he's almost happy to hear it, because it means not all is lost. Felix is still alive, Julius is still alive, and Annika is still sane, but for how long? He needs to hurry.

"The road is closed. I apologise." he tells the merchant at the front of the caravan again.

"I don't see any signs." the man protests, "Look, we really need to go. I got family in Priestella I need to see, and I'm already running late."

"I am sorry. I have no control over this." Reinhard smiles, apologetically. He really hopes they take the hint and back off, "The road is closed. We had an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?" another young man chimes in. Reinhard thinks he recognises him from somewhere. Must have been his other life, though, because the young man shows no such recognition on his soft face.

Reinhard is inclined to just tell them the truth. The fear of the Whale will certainly convince them to turn around, but Reinhard is not supposed to know that information. But then again, his crumbling reputation or all of their lives... it's an easy choice.

"We expect the White Whale to make an appearance." he tells them, raising his voice to be heard over their collective gasp, "It is not safe for anyone to be on that road at the moment."

He looks more gently at the woman in the back, holding her son's hand with an uncertain look in her eyes.

"Go home." he tells them, "Come back when it's safe."

The merchants, a few shades too pale, scatter almost immediately.

Reinhard patrols the road for several hours. The Whale never shows up.

He returns late at night, when the house is mostly silent. Everyone has exhausted themselves looking for a way out, and they're either sleeping, hoping to recover their strength enough to try again tomorrow, or just trying to think of something else.

Good.

Reinhard is well aware that there is no chance of *fixing this* while he's still around. He still doesn't know how much of the last timeline was real. Which was real? The corpse in the next room or the Felix that walked through the door right at the end? The corpse in the bed or the Julius that got angry with him for once?

Was either of them even there in the first place?

Was the other Reinhard real, and is he now back to the dying world he does not belong to?

Reinhard doesn't want to know, and he probably never will, but he can't stay here while his mind is betraying him. If at all.

It's a painful choice, but it's the only one he has at this point.

Quietly, he slips a key under each of the doors.

He hopes they will at least read his letters before burning them, but if they didn't, he would not blame them.

Subaru almost screams when Reinhard taps him on the shoulder. Not because of the start, really, as much as sheer frustration.

"What do you *want*?" he hisses, "I thought you'd at least wait for me to show up before killing me."

"I was never going to kill you."

"Well, *whatever* you were gonna do, okay?"

Reinhard eyes the sword at Subaru's side. It fits him poorly. He doesn't even know how to tie it properly.

What was he hoping to do with that?

"I wasn't going to do anything." Reinhard murmurs, "I don't know what I was thinking. I am... I am not well, Subaru."

"I gathered."

"No, listen."

Something in Reinhard's voice seems to actually give him pause, and Subaru lets him continue.

"I... I do not know what is real anymore. Are *you* real?"

Subaru looks almost offended for a moment: "Yes, I'm real!"

"Alright. I had to... well, I would say *I had to make sure*, but..." Reinhard falters, "...I am still not sure, actually. There is... so much about my life lately that is hard to believe. For all I know, I may be dreaming."

"You're not." Subaru tells him, almost harsh, but not quite, "You're not dreaming. You're just losing your mind. I guess... I guess that can happen to you, too."

It can. He's learning that too. It makes him wonder how much of his life was true.

Subaru is still holding the sword. Is it because he doesn't trust Reinhard, or because it's too heavy to keep it where it ought to be otherwise?

He's so much smaller than Reinhard realised.

"May I..." he puts his hand forward. He just needs to confirm. There is little chance of Reinhard being sane now, but he can't just let go of it all at once.

Subaru flinches back. Right.

"I will not hurt you." Reinhard promises, "I only want to know your true feelings. Then, I will go."

"Go?"

"Yes. For good." he nods, "Unless you come to look for me, you will never see me again."

Subaru does not believe him. It's clear on his face. So why does he offer his hand anyway?

That's a stupid question. Reinhard knows what it is to forget your own mortality.

Subaru's hands are small and delicate. He really is a boy, isn't he? One who feels confused, and a little scared, and *very* angry. Reinhard has felt that exact kind of anger before. It's the same he held towards the Archbishop.

He lets go of Subaru's hand like it burns: "I apologise. That was all I wanted to say."

Subaru still glares.

Reinhard backs away a little, ready to run out the door the second he's asked to: "Everyone is... I have freed everyone. They should be unharmed, I..."

"You don't know."

"No."

Subaru doesn't question it. He probably knows *that* feeling, too.

Neither of them says anything after that, but neither of them leaves.

It's early in the morning. Reinhard watches the sun rise slowly above the mountains he has exiled himself to. He would cry if he had any tears left to do so.

Logically, he knows they are unlikely to come look for him. But they say hope is always the last to die, and so he watches the road every day in search of a familiar face. He never finds it.

Maybe one day someone will come look for him, maybe someone will forgive him.

But as of right now, Reinhard is alone.